

WWII

DUNKIRK: REARGUARD FOUGHT TO THE LAST MAN

Bringing History to Life

ARDENNES:

Hitler's last triumph

Disguised German soldiers spread panic behind enemy lines

STALIN'S REVENGE:
DIVERSIONARY
MANOEUVRES LURED
GERMANS ASTRAY

DECISIVE BATTLES

JAPAN STOPPED

Marines proved their worth at Guadalcanal

PATTON & MONTY

Rivals race to win Sicily allowed Nazis to slip away

HITLER'S BEST SOLDIER

Otto Skorzeny

DESERT FOX: ROMMEL'S TACTICS KEPT BRITAIN GUESSING





➤➤ Decisive battles of WWII

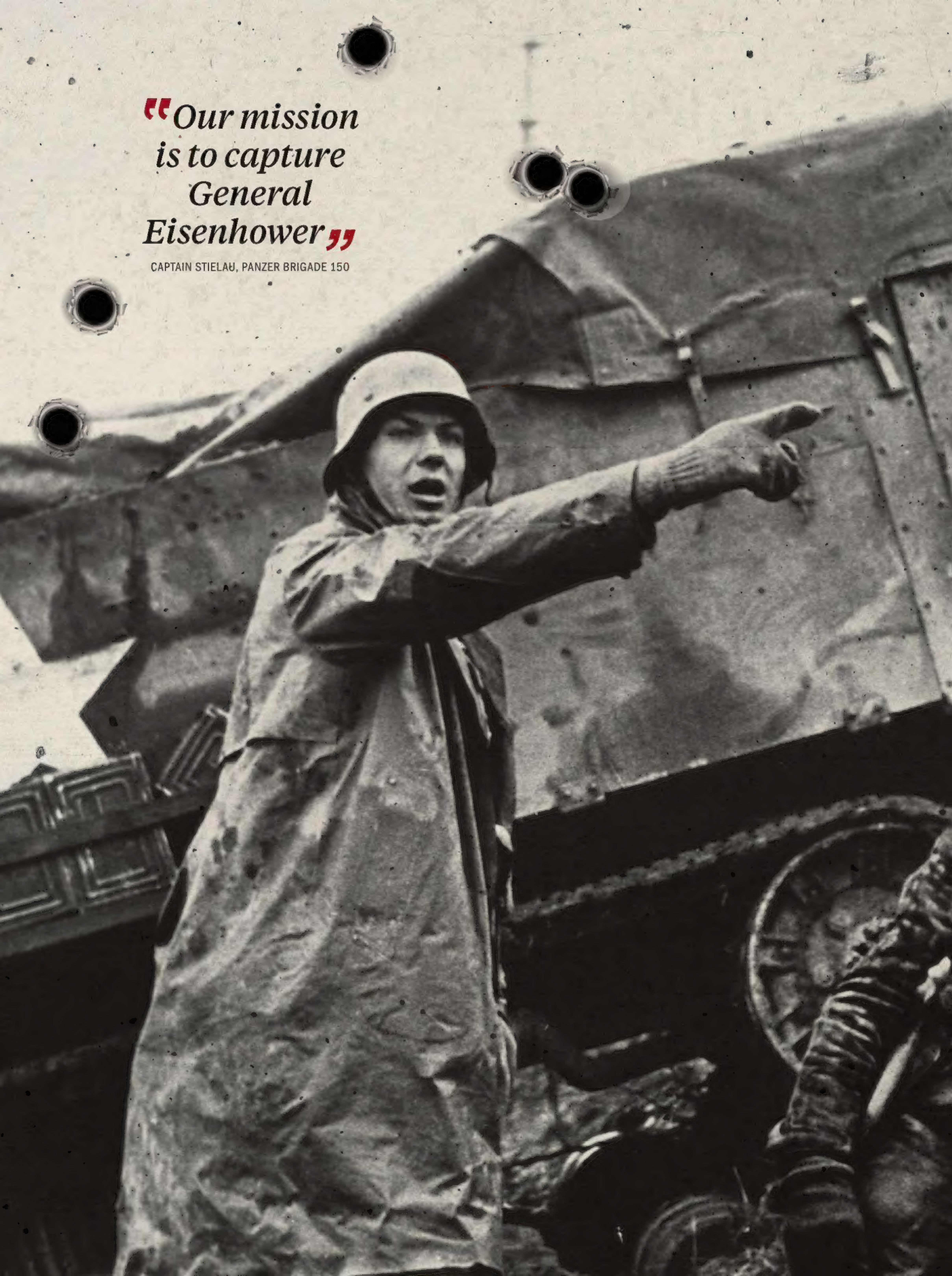
World War II remains the largest military conflict to date. By the time the guns were finally silenced, over 50 million people lay dead. Civilians repeatedly came under fire, especially on the Eastern Front. The Battle of Rzhev was one of the bloodiest in the war. Here Stalin sacrificed 1.5 million men to recapture the city. However, the German defence was so fierce that the Russians dubbed it the “Rzhev Meat Grinder”. When the

Nazis finally withdrew, they mined the city so heavily that they could hear the blasts in Berlin. But the German withdrawal also paved the way for Stalin’s massive westwards offensive.

This issue tells the story of the war’s most decisive battles, from Hitler’s capture of Poland in 1939 to the Red Army’s push west in 1944, as well as the bombing of Tokyo that lasted until March 1945, when the outcome of the war had become clear.

*“Our mission
is to capture
General
Eisenhower”*

CAPTAIN STIELAU, PANZER BRIGADE 150





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Napalm rained down on the city from 334 US bombers.

Blitzkrieg 1939-41:

Germany annexed its neighbours

One month after being invaded on 1st September 1939, Poland was occupied, and in the spring of 1940, the blitzkrieg continued. Hitler was forced to abandon his invasion plans for Britain, but by June 1941, the dictator's forces had subjugated Europe from north (Norway) to south (Crete), and west (French Atlantic Coast) to east (Soviet border).

German panzer divisions combined with air support to form the core of the blitzkrieg advance.

SCHERL/SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/
RITZAU/SCANPIX





Germany invades Norway,
9th April-9th June 1940

FINLAND

NORWAY

SWEDEN

Helsinki

• Leningrad

Stockholm

ESTONIA

DENMARK

• Copenhagen

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

Moscow

SOVIET UNION

EAST PRUSSIA

Warsaw

POLAND

Germany invades Poland,
1st September 1939

• Kiev

GERMANY



Berlin

• Prague

HOLLAND

BELGIUM

Germany attacks to the
west, 10th-27th May 1940

• Munich

SWITZERLAND

Milan

SLOVAKIA

HUNGARY

ROMANIA

BULGARIA

ITALY

Rome

Germany invades
Yugoslavia and Greece,
6th-27th April 1941

Sardinia

ALBANIA

Italy invades Greece,
28th October 1940

GREECE

TURKEY

Sicily

Tunis

TUNISIA

Germany captures Crete,
20th May-1st June 1941



Crete

MEDITERRANEAN



**GREAT
BRITAIN**

GERMANY

FRANCE

ITALY

POLAND

HUNGARY

ALGERIA

TUNISIA

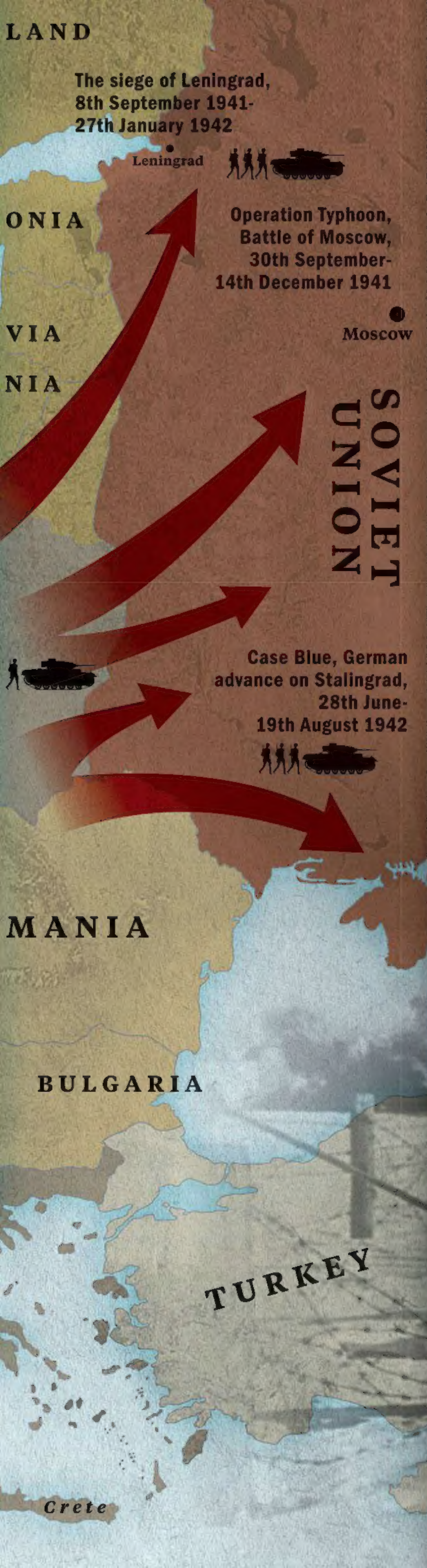
**Battle of Dieppe,
19th August 1942**

**1,000 bombs
dropped on Cologne,
30th May 1942**

**Operation Barbarossa,
22nd June-30th Sept 1941**

**Battle of Malta,
April-August 1942**





The siege of Leningrad,
8th September 1941-
27th January 1942

Leningrad

Operation Typhoon,
Battle of Moscow,
30th September-
14th December 1941

Moscow

SOVIET
UNION

Case Blue, German
advance on Stalingrad,
28th June-
19th August 1942

Operation Barbarossa 1941-42:

3.7 million Germans stormed east

In June 1941, Hitler launched a surprise attack on his former ally, the Soviet Union. 3.7 million German soldiers advanced over the 1,800-kilometre-long front. In the beginning, the blitzkrieg tactics worked as before, but the further east the Germans went, the harder Soviet resistance became. The blitzkrieg finally came to a halt outside the Soviets' major cities.

*The Soviet soldiers were
equipped with snow-white
camouflage suits.*

CORBIS HISTORICAL/GETTY IMAGES



The end game 1944-45:

The net tightened around Hitler

On 25th August 1944, French and US divisions rolled into Paris. The ultimate goal of the Normandy invasion a few months earlier had been met. The Third Reich was being squeezed from the east, west and south, slowly but surely pushing German forces back behind the country's original borders. The war was almost over, Hitler had lost.

The battles on the Eastern Front cost the lives of over six million German soldiers, many of whom were just boys.

HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES





FINLAND

NORWAY

SWEDEN

Helsinki

Leningrad

Stockholm

ESTONIA

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

Moscow

SOVIET UNION

Operation Bagration, 22nd June-19th August 1944

Operation Market Garden, 17th-26th September 1944

Hamburg

Copenhagen

GERMANY

Berlin

Battle of Berlin, 16th April-2nd May 1945

Warsaw

Prague

POLAND

Kiev

SLOVAKIA

HUNGARY

ROMANIA

BULGARIA

YUGOSLAVIA

ALBANIA

TURKEY

GREECE

MEDITERRANEAN

ITALY

Rome

Stalemate in Italy, 5th June-31st Dec 1944

Sicily

Tunis

TUNISIA

Crete

Decisive Battles

11

Front pages around the world
carried headlines about
Hitler's invasion of Poland.

POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Hitler's first campaign:

Invasion of Poland

By Åke Steinwall

When? September-October 1939

Where? Poland.

How? Early in the morning of 1st September 1939, over a million German soldiers crossed the border into Poland, and selected targets were bombed, including the garrison on the Westerplatte peninsula near Gdansk. At first, the Germans met fierce resistance, but then the offensive picked up speed, and a large number of German tanks simply roared past Polish defensive positions on their way to Warsaw. On 3rd September, Britain and France declared war on Germany, but the two countries didn't actively intervene to support Poland.

Before reaching the capital, the German advance was stopped by Polish defence troops, who continued to fight for several weeks, despite German bombs destroying large parts of the city. Meanwhile, Polish troops launched a successful counter-offensive near the city of Lodz. The Germans suffered heavy losses in the initial phase of the offensive, but were able to use reinforcements to eventually force the Poles to retreat.

The air and artillery shelling of Warsaw continued, and the Germans advanced ever further into the city. After fierce battles in the streets, the defenders surrendered on 28th September.

Why? In March 1939, Hitler had made two demands of Poland. First, the city of Danzig (present-day Gdansk) was to be reunited with Germany, and second, the Poles were to cede the Polish Corridor to the Germans, which would unite East Prussia with the rest of the German Empire. With the support of Britain and France, Poland rejected Hitler's demands. In August, the Germans agreed a secret non-aggression pact with the Soviets, in which the countries agreed to divide Poland between themselves.





SOVIET ATTACK

On 17th September, Soviet troops crossed into eastern Poland, as agreed with Germany. Fighting a war on two fronts was impossible for the Poles, and Stalin's Red Army was able to advance easily and quickly.

GERMAN ATTACK

Hitler invaded Poland from three sides: East Prussia in the north, the Nazi Germany in the west, and Slovakia in the south. A few days later, Poland launched an ultimately futile counter-attack on Lodz.

POLAND
INVADED
-OFFICIAL
THE
STAR

What happened next?

The attack on Poland sparked World War II, but in the autumn of 1939, the Poles were left to fight on their own.

17th September The Red Army invades eastern Poland.

18th September The Polish government begins evacuating its troops through Romania. Many soldiers join the western Allies.

20th September German and Soviet forces meet in Brest and celebrate the capture of Poland with joint military parades.

30th September Wladyslaw Sikorski becomes prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile.

8th October The last Polish defence forces surrender.

5th March 1940 Stalin orders 21,857 Polish prisoners to be executed in Soviet camps.

More than a million German soldiers attacked Poland on 1st September 1939.



*Despite being outnumbered, Finnish forces
used their mobility and camouflage to
become the Red Army's biggest nightmare.*

RITZAU



Death lurked in the snow

His finger curled gently around the trigger. The icy cold of a Finnish December bit into the sniper's skin, but he was oblivious. He lay completely still in the snow-covered landscape, squinting as he stared over the rifle's sight.

It was 21st December 1939. The gunman, who lay close to Finland's Kollaa River, silently filled his lungs with air twice. Oxygen flooded through his blood to his muscles. After a third inhalation, the sniper exhaled only halfway to take advantage of the point of breathing where the body is most relaxed. His index finger squeezed slowly and gently on the trigger.

The rifle's recoil pushed the butt hard into his shoulder muscle, as the 7.62-mm projectile sped across the snow at 850 metres per second. Far ahead of the sniper, a khaki-brown hat was flung into the air, accompanied by a small puff of blood that – for a second – glowed red against the snowy background. Another head shot to add to his tally.

The sniper's name was Simo Häyhä, and he always shot to kill, so his victims wouldn't suffer a slow, agonising death.

The Soviet soldier he'd just killed was number 25 – for the day. He would also be the last, as the afternoon sun was disappearing behind the trees to the west. Now the sniper prepared to wait before he could use the cover of darkness to sneak unseen back to the Finnish line where hot soup awaited him. At dawn, Häyhä

would once again be ready and waiting in the snow with his lethal weapon.

Horse trading sent Finland to war

During the Winter War's three-and-a-half months, thousands of Finns – both men and women – fought for their country's freedom with courage, tenacity and ingenuity. One man more than any other became a symbol of Finland's struggle: Simo Häyhä, who was so successful that he was dubbed "The White Death".

Two men were responsible for Häyhä becoming a sniper: Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Ideologically they were mortal enemies, but by the summer of 1939, they'd come to an agreement to cynically carve Eastern Europe up between them.

Hitler took advantage of the non-aggression pact to pounce on Poland, whereupon Britain and France declared war. While the three great powers started fighting, Stalin was free to subjugate small states along the Soviet border. The cautious tyrant preferred to achieve his aims with threats, but when Finland refused to submit, he left the matter to the Red Army.

The Finns discovered they were at war only when Soviet planes attacked Helsinki on 30th November 1939. Meanwhile, 425,000 Soviet troops moved towards the border. The plan was to occupy Finland so Stalin would receive the territory as a gift for his birthday on 21st December.

All Finns would make sacrifices

In Finland, the army was called up, and 250,000 men arrived at the munitions stores to receive their equipment. Their number was impressive for a country with just 3.7 million inhabitants, but many soldiers would have to guard the long and vulnerable coastline. At the front along the border, the Finns were hopelessly outnumbered.

"Our hereditary enemy is once again attacking our country," said 72-year-old Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim in a radio broadcast. A generation before, the national hero had led the struggle for Finland's independence from Russia, and now he was called up from retirement to take command again.

Victory seemed impossible, but the troops would have to fight to prevent >>>

On 30th November 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Finland. The Red Army expected a quick victory with its thousands of soldiers, tanks and fighter planes, but in the snow-white landscape, an invisible enemy awaited: camouflaged snipers who could kill with a single shot.



At dawn on 30th November 1939, Soviet bombers attacked Finland's capital, Helsinki. Sixty-one Finns died in the raid, which signalled the start of the Red Army's invasion.

Finland from being wiped from the map. One such soldier was 35-year-old Simo Häyhä, whose family farm was near the border.

Häyhä joined Finland's equivalent of the Home Guard – the White Guard – aged just 17, and later he was drafted into the army, where he reached the rank of corporal during his period of national service. Back on the farm, he rejoined the White Guard, but it wasn't until now – in 1939 – that his training would finally be tested in combat.

Fear followed soldiers

Häyhä was called up to the Finnish Army's 6th Company of Infantry Regiment 34, which prepared for battle in what is now Ladoga Karelia, north of Lake Ladoga. The troops were distributed thinly, for the army expected no major attack in the region as it was covered by deep forest.

Unbeknown to the Finns, however, the Red Army had laid a secret railway line that went all the way up to the Finnish border in Ladoga Karelia. It allowed 75,000 men to advance across the frontier, accompanied by 150 tanks and 200 guns.

"We assembled our barbed wire, fortified our trenches and finished digging our foxholes," Häyhä said of his second day of war. "The first Soviet attack against us came during the darkness."

Simo Häyhä's 6th Company held out, but other troops from the 34th Regiment

were swept away as they tried to hold on to the strategic village of Suojärvi to the north. The Red Army attacked the crucial road and rail hub with thousands of men and tanks that the Finns couldn't match with their own weapons.

"Men start to run without hearing the commands and curses of their officers. Panic spreads..." a soldier wrote afterwards.

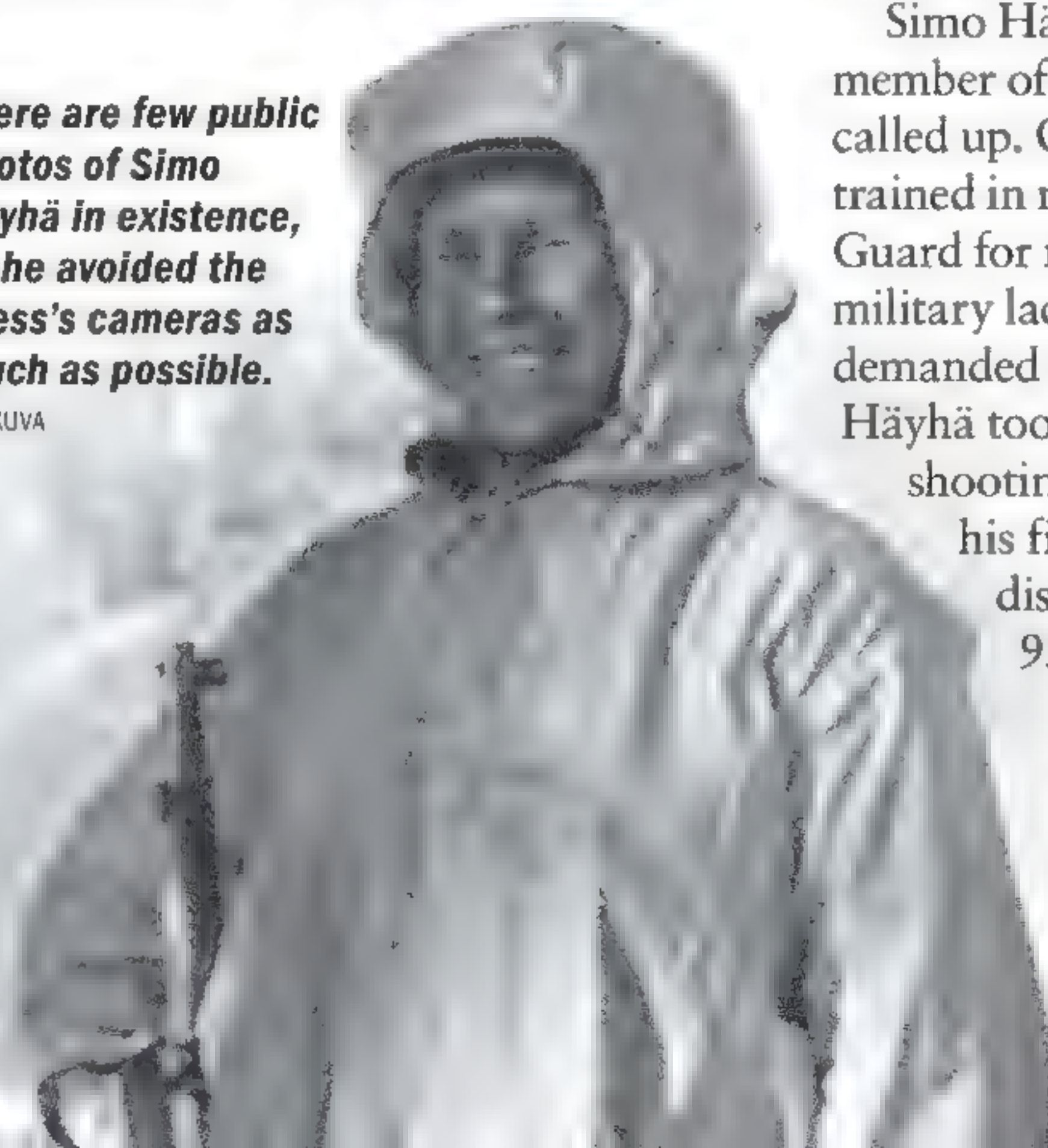
Suojärvi fell on the third day of the war to give the invaders an opportunity to swing around Lake Ladoga and attack the main force of the Finnish Army from the rear. The fate of Finland would depend on whether the Finnish troops could form a new line of defence.

"Kollaa will hold"

Exhausted and disheartened Finns retreated through the snowy landscape

There are few public photos of Simo Häyhä in existence, as he avoided the press's cameras as much as possible.

SA KUVA



until they reached the River Kollaa, 30 kilometres from Suojärvi. Corporal Häyhä lost many neighbours and friends in the attack, for most soldiers in the 34th Regiment came from the area they were now fighting to defend.

The survivors were ordered to dig down by the banks of the river. The new positions must be held at all costs, the order read, but the task seemed impossible. The river was just two metres wide in several places.

"Will Kollaa hold?" asked the general who'd assumed command of the defensive line.

"Kollaa will hold, unless we are told to run!" replied Simo Häyhä's company commander, Aarne Juutilainen.

The press relayed the short conversation at both home and abroad, and the words became symbolic of the Finns' resistance.

Stalin's troops launched their onslaught at Kollaa on 8th December, but this time the Finns were ready for them. Guns were secreted next to the area's few roads where Soviet tanks could advance, and troops improvised weapons to destroy armoured vehicles. The attack was repelled, but while new Soviet attacks followed, the front became frozen solid, and Simo Häyhä began his transformation into the deadliest sniper in history.

The rifle became Häyhä's friend

Finland had no specialist sharpshooters when the Winter War broke out – in fact, it had a tiny army in 1939. During World War I, champion marksmen were pulled from their units across the front so they could hunt unwary enemies on their own. But after the war, this specialism was phased out.

Simo Häyhä was therefore a regular member of the infantry when he was called up. On the other hand, he'd trained in marksmanship for the White Guard for many years. The Finnish military lacked resources, so instructors demanded that every cartridge count.

Häyhä took part in White Guard shooting competitions, and on his first attempt at 300 metres' distance, struck the target 93 times out of 100.

When Häyhä went to war, he took the weapon he'd used for years in drills and on shooting ranges. The »

The Red Army bet on a swift victory

Stalin tried to intimidate Finland into surrendering territory along the border and allowing the Soviets to build a military base on its south coast. When the Finns refused, the dictator unleashed the Red Army with orders to crush all Finnish resistance within three weeks.

Swedish volunteers fought alongside Finland's troops in the war against the Red Army.

GETTY IMAGES

David vs Goliath

The Finns mobilised 250,000 men straight away. Including all reserves and services, the army numbered 400,000 men.

In November 1939, the Soviets deployed around 420,000 men. By March 1940, that number had increased by a further 340,000.

400,000 760,000

At the outbreak of the war, the army possessed 32 Renault tanks. These were obsolete and played no part in battles. The Finns did possess newer Vickers tanks, but only 10 were combat-ready.



The army deployed around 2,500 tanks but expanded their number by another 4,000 during the war. Most were lightly armoured.



10 6,500

In 1939, Finland had 110 aircraft of various types – including biplanes – of which only 75 were suitable for combat.



The Soviets started with just 1,000 aircraft, but quickly expanded their number to 4,000.



75 4,000

Number of casualties

Soldiers
25,000

Tanks
8

Aircraft
62

Soldiers
250,000

Tanks
2,000

Aircraft
1,000



SOVIET ADVANCE SOUTH FREEZES

The mining town of Petsamo falls quickly to Stalin's troops. But attempts to advance further south stall because the Finns take full advantage of the polar night to carry out commando-style raids.

FINNS HUMILIATE INVADERS

A Soviet division of around 17,000 men attack Salla but are repulsed against all odds by about 3,500 Finnish soldiers.

AMBUSH AT SUOMUSSALMI

The invaders plans to cut Finland in two, but the Finns split up the strike force and wipe out pockets of resistance one by one.

KOLLAA HOLDS

Soviet troops break through at Kollaa. The plan is to attack the Finns on the Karelian Peninsula from the rear. But a new Finnish line is formed by the river, and the attack halts.

FINLAND

SOVIET UNION

DEFENSIVE LINE STOPS THE ATTACK

The Red Army's main line of attack is through the Karelian Peninsula, where the roads make it possible for large armies to operate. But the Finns' 136-km-long Mannerheim Line is full of bunkers, and the Red Army's onslaught ends in gruesome losses.

Stalin's troops bombarded Finnish defences for months.



RITZAU

M/28-30 rifle was a Finnish refinement of the ageing Mosin-Nagant rifle that debuted in 1891 in Tsarist Russia. It had an improved firing mechanism, and the sight was less conspicuous than the scope adopted by new Soviet variants.

The weapon was intended for the Finnish White Guard, and members were encouraged to buy the rifle with a small public subsidy. Häyhä took advantage of the opportunity. The rifle was his own, and he knew it intimately.

Patience meant survival

Häyhä had only fought on the Kollaa front for a few days when he was pulled from his unit. His company commander had spotted his deadly accuracy, and the sharpshooting corporal would now be operating solo as a sniper.

Every day, Häyhä added to the enemy's losses, and his deadly effectiveness was not simply down to his thorough practice in the White Guard. Before the war, he often went hunting, and his experience spending

long days in Finland's forests proved equally as important as his ability to hit a target. Snipers – like hunters – had to move without being seen or heard, choose the best possible shooting position, and then have endless reserves of patience.

Häyhä's task was made easier by the fact that many Soviet soldiers were woeful marksmen. Early on, he was ordered to venture out of his position to cut a telephone line.

"I did that and cut the wires, taking my time, although the Russians were shooting at me with a machine gun from a position about 200 metres away," he recalled after the war.

But other enemies were potentially lethal, for the Red Army had also deployed snipers to the Kollaa front.

Snipers duelled in the snow

Corporal Häyhä had proved his worth as the 6th Company's sniper when Lieutenant Juutilainen gave him a difficult task. Three Finnish division

commanders had been shot and it was clear that they were victims of the same gunman. The company commander wanted the sniper eliminated.

Before dawn broke, Häyhä donned woollen clothes before putting on a white camouflaged suit to blend into the snow. While it was still dark, the marksman snuck forward. The day before, he'd chosen a suitable place to position himself. It was in the shade to avoid the sun glinting off his metal rifle, and situated so that any traces he'd left in the snow from reaching it weren't visible to enemy positions.

The winter sun finally rose just after 10.00, and from that point on, Häyhä lay motionless, his gaze moving slowly from side to side as he scoured the terrain in front of him. There was no trace of the enemy marksman.

A mere six hours later, the short day was already over. The sun was setting among the trees behind the Finnish shooter when a flash of light far ahead caught his attention. Häyhä guessed it

Sharp eyes and patience ensured the sniper's survival

Unlike other marksmen, Simo Häyhä did not mount a sight on to his Mosin-Nagant M/28-30 rifle. Instead, he relied on the rifle's primitive iron sight, which wouldn't glint off the sun to reveal his position.

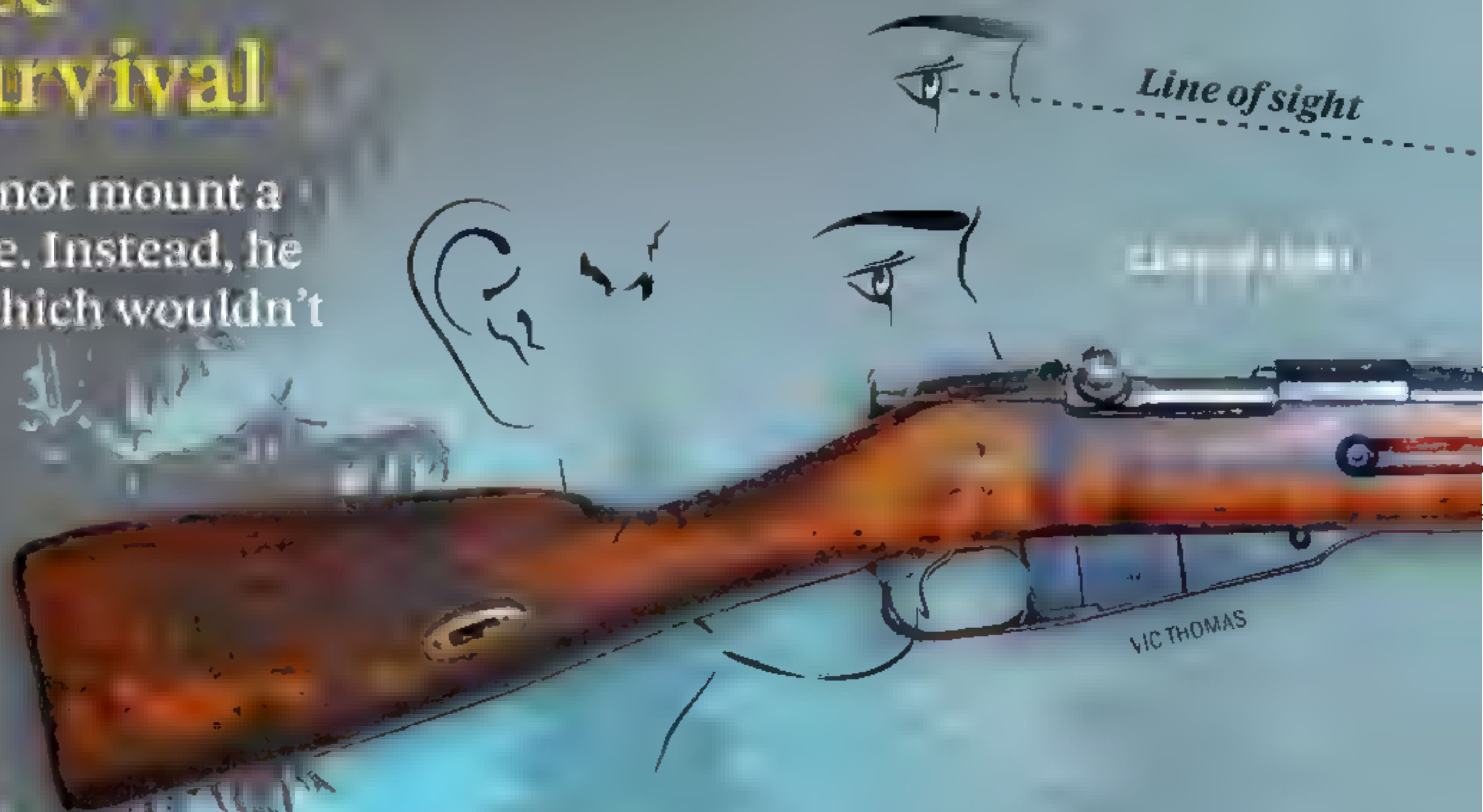
YOU SURVIVE

Find a well-shaded spot – for example, under a spruce tree with long-hanging branches. Then avoid getting the sun in your eyes or letting it glint off your weapon.

Be sure to sweep any visible tracks to your hideout so the enemy can't spot your position.

YOU DIE

- Isolated buildings or a church tower are tempting lookouts for inexperienced snipers, but are exactly where the enemy will look first.
- Never shoot from the top of a hill where your head and upper body are clearly silhouetted against the sky, making you an easy target.
- The tops of trees provide good views, but climbing one is suicidal; you can't escape if the enemy catches sight of you.
- Don't return to the same hideout, as there's a risk the enemy will discover your spot and post their own snipers to kill you.



Preferably use the rifle's own sight to avoid glare from a scope.

Find a hiding spot that's to the side rather than straight ahead. It makes you harder to spot, and allows you to snipe from an unexpected angle.

must be the glint from a telescopic sight, and a moment later he saw a white-clad figure stand up with stiff limbs. The Soviet sniper had halted the day's hunt.

The Finn took aim, pressed the trigger, and quickly inserted another cartridge into the chamber of his rifle. It was unnecessary; the first projectile had penetrated his opponent's cheek and passed through his head, killing him.

Frozen conditions played key role

The Red Army continued to attack the Kollaa front as temperatures continued to fall. At -40° C, conditions determined what operations could be carried out. The invading army may have had planes, guns and tanks to spare, but it was completely unprepared to wage winter warfare.

One US war correspondent was shocked when he saw a group of men who had surrendered to the Finns:

"The Russian troops the Kremlin High Command has thrown against the eastern side of the Karelian bottleneck

probably are the most miserable-looking creatures to be seen in uniform in this part of Europe since Napoleon's half-starved tatterdemalions straggled back from Moscow," he reported.

"None of the men we saw possessed high boots... and several of them, as a result, had feet so frozen they could scarcely walk."

A Finnish colonel handed down a short, sharp verdict on the enemy:

"Such infantry we have never seen. They are not soldiers."

In addition to their inadequate clothing, Soviet troops also suffered

from constant hunger. Their supply lines were negligible, and the Finns took full advantage. When Finnish troops withdrew from an area, they evacuated the civilian population and burned all of the buildings. Nothing was left for the invading army.

On top of this, while they were on the move, Red Army soldiers had to sleep outside in the cold. Moreover, unlike the Finns, they had access to only a few stoves with which to warm themselves at night. Instead, they lit bonfires, but the flames attracted both Finnish shells and night patrols.

Bloody experience taught the invaders they would have to settle for a few embers at the bottom of a hole. Despair spread quickly through an army that appeared so powerful on paper.

Forests filled Soviets with terror

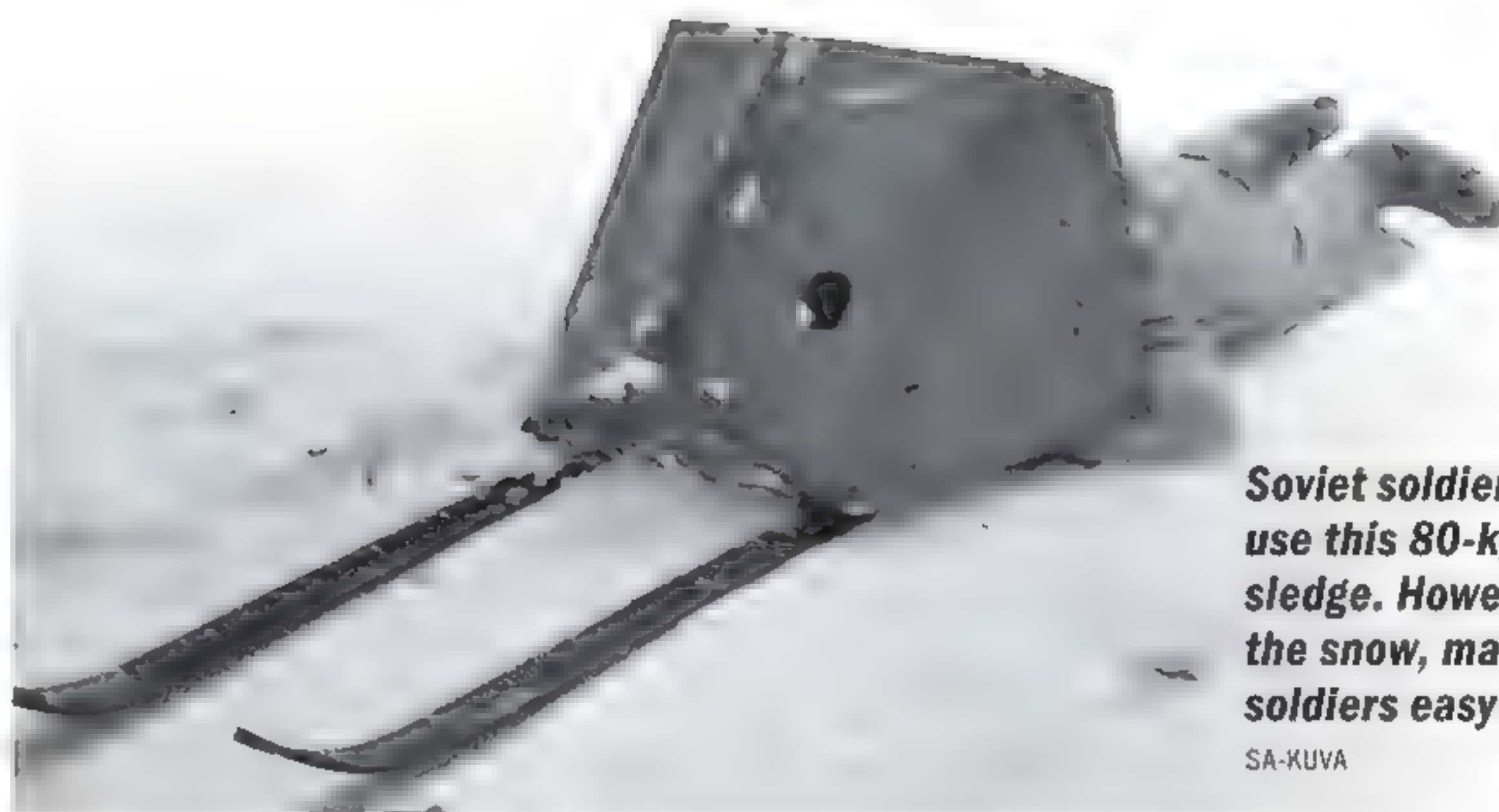
On the Kollaa River, Soviet soldiers attacked again and again as December progressed. Waves of men in greatcoats fought their way through the snow, but each time, the frontal assault was halted by the snarling salvos from Finnish machine guns. The returning fire was surprisingly ineffective.

"Their shooting was bad – they shot chiefly from the hip when advancing with little or no covering fire from support sections," one journalist was told by Finnish soldiers.

The Red Army was hampered by the poor quality of its commanders, so even relatively simple operations were messed up. In Moscow, Kliment Voroshilov, People's Commissar for the Defence of the Soviet Union, had no doubts why:

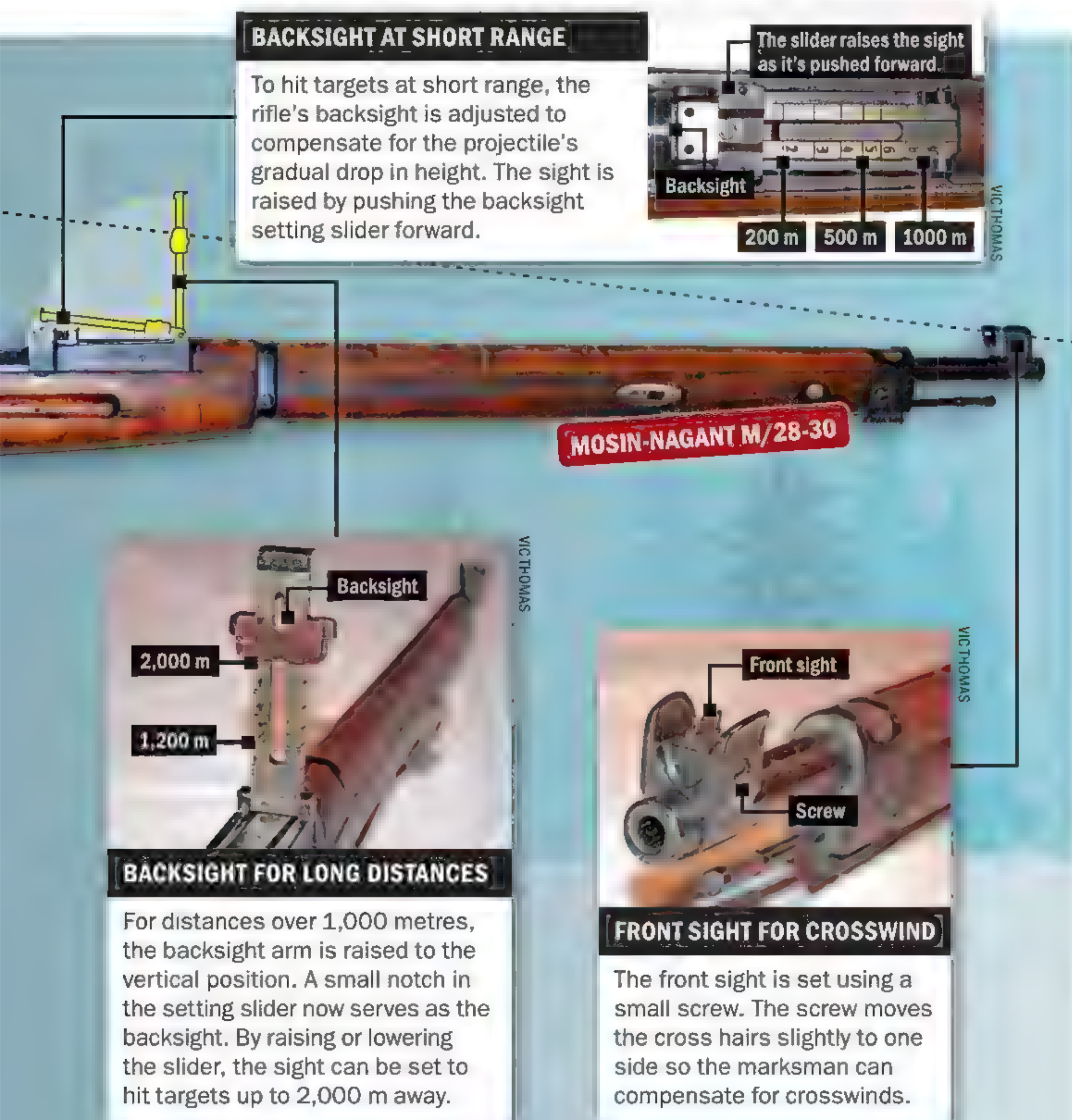
"You're the one who annihilated the Old Guard of the army; you had our best generals killed!" Voroshilov told Stalin bravely, reminding him that the dictator himself had purged the army's officers during the 1930s.

Normally it was suicide to talk like that, but even Stalin had to admit >>>



Soviet soldiers attempted to use this 80-kg armoured ski sledge. However, it sank into the snow, making the soldiers easy prey.

SA-KUVA



Improvised weapons destroyed Stalin's tanks

The Red Army sent thousands of tanks across Finland's borders. The Finns had almost no armoured forces, so they had to develop alternative weapons to stop the mighty vehicles in their tracks.

Spirits set fire to tanks

Finland's state-owned distillery Oy Alkoholiliiike Ab provided over 500,000 half-litre bottles whose flammable contents were intended for Soviet tanks. The simple but deadly weapon was christened the Molotov cocktail as an ironic greeting to Stalin's newly appointed foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov.

MOLOTOV COCKTAIL



TNT halted the advance

Ordinary hand grenades were usually not enough on their own to stop the Soviet tanks. The Finns encased their old grenades in TNT charges to increase their explosive power.

The charge was thrown between the tank wheels, destroying the caterpillar track in the explosion. Alternatively, it could be thrown at the rear of the vehicle to blow up the engine.

JAEGER PLATOON WEBSITE

TNT CHARGE



Sweden delivered

Finland's most powerful weapon against tanks was the 37 PstK/36 anti-tank gun, which was supplied by Swedish manufacturer Bofors. The powerful gun was used by many countries and could penetrate the armour of most tanks in 1939. The Finns only possessed around 100, but were given more by Sweden.

BOFORS ANTI-TANK GUN



that a show trial followed by firing squad would not eliminate the problem.

On 19th December, the Soviet assaults on the Kollaa River halted, and a strange calm soon descended on the other fronts, too. But for Simo Häyhä, the war became more intense than ever.

Master marksman had free rein

Every day, Häyhä set out to hunt down enemies. Sometimes he was joined by

Corporal Malmi, who helped identify targets with binoculars.

"We observed the enemy activity during the day," Häyhä recalled. "When darkness came, I prepared myself a good firing position. I even packed the snow on the ground in a manner that it would not give me away by dusting from the muzzle blast."

Häyhä continued to favour using his M/28-30, even though the rifle had no

scope. His precise aim was all he needed, as he demonstrated when company commander Lieutenant Juutilainen handed him a fresh task.

Juutilainen had spent hours personally trying to take out a sniper hiding near the Soviet trenches 400 metres away using a rifle with a scope, but without success. Now it was Häyhä's turn.

"At first, I did not see a trace of him, just a small rock where he was supposed to be. After careful investigation, we spotted him behind a little hump of snow near that rock. I took a careful aim with my trusty M/28-30 and the very first shot hit the intended target."

Most of the sniper's kills, however, took place over shorter distances.

"Corporal Malmi and I spotted a new area of enemy accommodation bunkers," said Häyhä. "We moved silently through the forest and got within 150 metres of the enemy bunkers, which were located between the front lines. We spent the whole day in our position and killed 19 Russians. They never learned where we were."

Häyhä was on his way to taking the title of most deadly sniper in history.

Ideal hunting ground

Juutilainen had kept track of Häyhä's performance

from the beginning of the battles at Kollaa. On 21st December, when the snow was falling, and visibility was impaired, Häyhä shot 25 enemy soldiers. It took his total number of kills to 100 Soviet soldiers in the space of just 22 days.

Häyhä became so well known that he found himself being seconded to neighbouring units. His new targets were Soviet artillery periscopes and forward observers directing the Soviet guns.

This was dangerous work: "I only got two or three shots at the forward observer's periscope before the Russians started to shoot at us with heavy artillery fire. Shrapnel, tree branches and ash were flying all over the place, but miraculously we survived."

Undeterred, Häyhä approached from a different angle, and destroyed the scope.

Soon Lieutenant Juutilainen had recorded 200 hits, while more welcome news arrived from the north. Here, in the desolate landscape, there were no fixed fronts, and the Finns would strike

via a series of commando-style raids. Within a few weeks, one Finnish division had wiped out two divisions of the Red Army, despite the latter's artillery, tanks and numerical superiority. The heavy vehicles bound the invasion forces to the area's few roads, while lightly armed Finnish units could traverse the terrain on skis.

Magnificent victories in the battles of Suomussalmi and the Raate Road boosted the fighting spirit of the Finnish troops to new heights – as did accounts of the exploits of “The White Death”, which reached all corners of the world.

Stalin refused to give up

The world was clearly on the side of a battling Finland – volunteers flocked from all over Scandinavia to fight. Sweden also sent munitions – including a third of the Swedish Air Force's aircraft – but no one was willing to intervene directly.

“All Scandinavia dwells brooding under Nazi and Bolshevik threats,” said First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill in a BBC radio speech in January 1940. “Only Finland-superb, nay, sublime-in-the-jaws-of-peril-Finland shows what free men can do,” he pointed out, conveniently forgetting the fact Finland would have remained neutral had she not been attacked.

But while France and Britain dithered over offering help, the Red Army regathered and rearmed. If any Finns had allowed themselves to believe Stalin would abandon his scheme, they were wrong. Better Soviet generals and troops arrived at the front. Thorough plans were made, and the chaotic supply lines were finally put in order. Any talk of peace was out of the question.

One shot ended Häyhä's war

In February 1940, the new Soviet onslaught began. This time, the infantry did not advance en masse, but edged towards Finnish positions. The exhausted Finnish soldiers were forced to retreat.

A sniper was no longer of great value to the army, and Simo Häyhä was instead given command of a group of soldiers. Bitter fighting lasted for weeks until the enemy finally struck a blow on 6th March.

“I was in the dark forests of Ulismaa. We were once more given a mission to

counter-attack, one of many,” he recalled after the war.

The Finns had just advanced across a swamp when Häyhä was hit in the face.

“I felt how my mouth was full of bone fragments and blood,” he said. “The bullet had entered through the upper lip and penetrated my left cheek.”

Elk became sniper's new target

Häyhä had been hit by a ‘dumdum’ bullet – a projectile designed to expand on impact to rip everything to shreds. The left side of the sniper's upper jaw and part of his lower jaw were blown away by the shot. He was ferried to the rear on a sledge and remained in a coma until waking up one week later, on 13th March 1940.

On the same day, the Winter War ended. The Red Army had penetrated the Finns' Mannerheim line, making any further resistance hopeless.

Finland had to beg for a ceasefire. Stalin immediately agreed – the Red Army's honour had been restored by its victories in March, and the dictator wished to put the earlier debacle behind him. Finland was forced to cede huge

areas of its territory as payment for peace, but her fierce resistance had ended Stalin's dream of occupying the entire country.

The price for Finland's continued independence was 25,000 killed. Nevertheless, Simo Häyhä – who survived the brutal head shot – had no doubts that his and others' sacrifices had been worth it: “I did what I was told to, as well as I could,” he said later. “There would be no Finland unless everyone else had done the same.”

Just one year later, Finland returned to war with the Soviet Union. This time, it did so alongside Hitler as part of Operation Barbarossa – he'd seen the Red Army falter in the Winter War and believed Stalin could be easily crushed. Instead, he should have paid more attention to how quickly Soviet troops recovered from their initial defeats.

Simo Häyhä, who with 542 confirmed killings had broken all sniper records, was not involved in the new war. The White Death returned to his simple country life, where history's most deadly sniper contented himself hunting elk.

Finns wanted revenge

The Winter War ended with Finland having to cede large tracts of land to the enemy. In 1941, Finland decided to recapture its lost territory.

Stalin's demand for land in return for peace left the Finns thirsty for revenge. When Hitler offered Finland a chance to win back all it had lost, the government seized the opportunity and joined the Germans in Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

The Finns dubbed the new showdown the ‘Continuation War’, its initial goal to win back lost territories. But huge German victories fuelled dreams of a Greater Finland, adding Soviet areas whose population spoke Finnish dialects. The dream was shattered, however, when the war turned on the Eastern Front.

The Finnish government again had to sue Stalin for peace, and the price was additional territorial transfers. Two bitter defeats had taught the small country a harsh lesson: it could not pursue policies that went against the interests of its mighty neighbour.

PETSAMO

The Continuation War ended with Finland also having to cede land around the town of Petsamo.



THE KARELIAN PENINSULA

After the Winter War, Finland gave up land around Salla and the Karelian Peninsula to the USSR.



Dunkirk's real heroes:

Rearguard fought to the very last

When the British evacuated 338,000 soldiers from France in 1940, the Royal Navy and RAF received much of the credit for the "miracle of Dunkirk". But if tens of thousands of infantry hadn't fought to the last to delay the Germans, Hitler would probably have won the war.

By Kasper Schlie

The 28-year-old British captain Marcus Ervine-Andrews knew he was facing an almost superhuman task as he gazed out into the morning mist. On the other side of the canal that surrounded Dunkirk stood an entire German division. But Ervine-Andrews and his 200 exhausted men had to defend the stretch of water in front of them at all costs. It was then, on 1st June 1940, when his men were at their most weary, that the Germans launched an attack along the entire line. Everywhere, infantry groups were skimming across the canal in rubber dinghies.

"Hold your fire until I blow my whistle!" Ervine-Andrews shouted to his men. The Germans were halfway across when he gave the signal. A

second later, British machine guns began punching holes in the water's surface.

The Germans fell in droves, but despite their heavy losses, they continued to send in new attacks. After ten hours, a group succeeded in crossing the water and pushed back the outnumbered British. Ervine-Andrews knew he had to lead by example and his next actions led Britain's King George VI to later award the captain the Victoria Cross for his "conspicuous gallantry". Ervine-Andrews crawled up on to a thatched barn, from where he picked off 17 Germans with precise single shots from his rifle before grabbing a Bren machine gun and laying down so much fire that the

enemy's advance was halted. Only when the barn's roof was set on fire by mortars did Ervine-Andrews jump to the ground and lead his men to safety.

Ervine-Andrews had succeeded: the Wehrmacht had been delayed by a few more vital hours. Similar scenes were played out at the same time all around Dunkirk, where 44,000 Allied rearguard soldiers launched themselves into an unequal battle against the superior German forces. The defenders had been ordered to fight to the last to delay the fall of Dunkirk, so that the entire British Expeditionary Force (BEF), and as many French as possible, could be evacuated to Dover.

The very survival of Britain depended on the sacrifice of the rearguard: if the Germans had broken through, they »

would have annihilated the expeditionary force's professional soldiers, and nothing would have remained to prevent Hitler from crossing the English Channel and capturing London.

The rearguard had to be sacrificed

Just 14 days earlier, on 16th May, General Erwin Rommel led his German armoured divisions across the French border. Up to a thousand tanks roared at top speed towards the coast.

Rommel was euphoric. He recalled the moment in his memoirs: "Maginot Line breached! One could scarcely believe it ... we had broken through ... [and were] deep into enemy country."

In a huge pincer manoeuvre, the Germans reached the English Channel four days later and surrounded up to 500,000 troops from the BEF, Belgian and French armies. A week later, the defenders were trapped in a pocket and close to a complete collapse. But then the Germans halted their advance so that their scattered forces could be reinforced with infantry.

BEF chief, Lord Gort, seized the opportunity to save his army. He ordered the British and French soldiers to retreat along a narrow corridor to the port city of Dunkirk, from where they could be evacuated to England. But while the majority of the British made a dash towards the port, a rearguard of 40,000 soldiers turned to face the Germans. Together with the French, their task was to buy vital time for the rescue operation to be carried out.

"Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now"

GENERAL SIR ALAN BROOKE

There wasn't enough manpower to form an unbroken line of defence, so over the next 48 hours, Lord Gort established a series of heavily fortified bulwarks in the form of villages, farms and bridges. They did not know it yet, but when the rearguard troops moved into villages such as Cassel and Le Paradis on 26th May, their generals were convinced that the majority would



The British soldiers were forced backwards by the German troops at the beginning of the war. Here, a lightly armoured tracked vehicle with a Bren machine gun prepares for combat.

never see their homeland again – they were a necessary sacrifice to save the BEF and the British nation.

Gunner took on three tanks

One of the strongest bulwarks was at the French town of Cassel. The walled hilltop town offered the British a panoramic view of the flat summer fields and advancing Germans. In the town square, the British got a taste of the coming horrors as German shells rained down on a French column, and the cobblestones were covered with charred corpses and dead horses.

"I can still see a black pony in agony and terror with full shining teeth, and jaws apart," wrote British Private Melville Thomas in his diary.

Roadblocks and anti-tank guns were placed at the three access roads, and the town's walls were manned. In addition, the British set up perimeter positions around three kilometres from the town in the hope that the small companies could delay the Germans' approach.

On 27th May, German General von Rundstedt launch his newly strengthened force in a fresh advance. Shortly afterwards, an armoured division moved into a forest near Cassel, which the British could see from the town's walls. As 24 German tanks drove out from the forest's edge and began thundering forward, gunner Harry Munn, who was positioned on the wall, knew he needed to act.

"As the tanks got nearer, we could clearly see the Swastika flags on the

front," he later recalled. Three tanks broke away and headed towards Munn's position. When they were 600 metres away, the gunner fired his two-pound gun; the lead German tanks immediately returned fire. In all, 15 shells were exchanged, bouncing off the tank's armour and the town's walls respectively, before Munn put an end to the enemy machine by targeting its caterpillar tracks. Soon, the German crew scrambled out of the vehicle and fled back to their lines, with British bullets flying around their ears. The next tank proved more vulnerable.

"This time the shell penetrated the armour, exploded inside the tank and blew it into small pieces ... There were no survivors," Munn recounted. The third tank went the same way.

Thanks to a total of 24 anti-tank guns, the British were able to contain the first wave of German attacks against Cassel.

SS committed war crime

Some 30 kilometres south of Cassel, a depleted battalion of British troops had been given a suicide mission: to defend a farm just outside the village of Le Paradis against a German armoured battalion. The British battalion was awakened just before dawn on 27th May by the sound of falling shells. The Germans, still a few kilometres away, were busy demolishing the farm's outlying positions. Bob Brown was manning the radio at the farm, listening to increasingly desperate messages from

the besieged companies before they fell silent one by one.

Signalman Alf Blake, one of Brown's buddies, radioed the telegraphist before his company was overrun: "I'm afraid we're for it," he said. "Don't forget me." Brown never heard from him again.

When all the lines were dead, Brown went to the farm's wall and began firing at the advancing Germans with around 130 other soldiers. The farm was close to being surrounded, but the battalion's commanding officer refused to retreat.

"Others are depending on us," he told Captain Hastings, who later wrote an account of the battle.

The last cartridges were distributed among the men. Hastings destroyed the battalion's papers and war diary to save them falling into enemy hands. But it was only when the farm's roof caught fire that the British chose to surrender. Hastings waved a white towel as the

men scurried out of the burning farm with their hands up. Unfortunately, they were surrendering to the dreaded SS Panzer Division 'Totenkopf'.

German rifle butts hammered down on the 99 disarmed Britons, who soon after witnessed an agitated meeting between a small group of SS officers. The Germans claimed that the enemy had used illegal dum-dum bullets and fired on medical orderlies, and that 'justice' was therefore in order.

The beaten soldiers were marched into a farmyard and lined up before two heavy machine guns.

"I felt as though an icy hand gripped my stomach," Private Bert Pooley said later, recalling the moment when he'd seen the weapons.

Those who didn't die in the hail of bullets were finished off with a shot to the head or stabbed with bayonets before the Germans

disappeared. As darkness fell, two bodies among the pile of corpses began to move. They were badly injured, but Pooley and Signaller Bill O'Callaghan had survived and dragged themselves over to a nearby pigsty, where they hid in the mud. During the night, they heard the cries of another survivor, but fearing that the Germans might return, they didn't dare to try to save their >>>

Trapped French delayed the Germans

The French troops caught in Lille refused to surrender. Their courage forced the Germans to spend disproportionate resources to take the city.

On 28th May, it became clear to the 35,000 French soldiers in Lille that they were surrounded. They'd been unable to reach the corridor leading to Dunkirk before 110,000 Germans in seven divisions caught them in a pincer manoeuvre, surrounding their position in the French city. But instead of surrendering, Generals Molinié and Mesny chose to continue fighting to gain time for their allies further north.

For three days, they tied up one-eighth of the Germans' available

infantry and around 800 tanks, giving the British the chance to evacuate more soldiers from Dunkirk than they'd previously anticipated. The gesture wasn't lost on Winston Churchill, who later praised the French contribution in his autobiography.

When the French finally surrendered on 1st June, the Germans showed their respect for the French soldiers' bravery by letting them march out of the city in orderly ranks.

Only after the ammunition ran out did the trapped French surrender.

The Germans were forced to spend three days capturing the city of Lille.



Rearguard held the door ajar for the British Army

Up to 400,000 Allied soldiers fought to the death in the northern French city of Dunkirk. It was their fierce fighting spirit that enabled the Royal Navy to carry out the largest evacuation operation in history.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM & GETTY IMAGES & CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE

TANK SUPPORT

Behind the lines, the British conducted frequent patrols with light tanks, which could quickly be deployed to hotspots.

EVACUATION POINTS

The evacuation took place from the eastern pier and beach. The port itself had been destroyed by bombs.

BEACONS OF BLACK SMOKE

Burning oil tanks at the harbour served as navigation points for the British troops who had to find their way to Dunkirk.

GUNS SLOWED THE GERMAN TROOPS

The French were the first to build defensive lines around Dunkirk. Most of the artillery emplaced was therefore of French origin.

Area defended by the French

FRANCE

First line of defence

On the 29th-30th May, the British and French forces retreated to the area around Dunkirk, forming a 30-kilometre line of defence. It had been hastily set up by the French and was now manned by around 4,000 British and 40,000 French troops. Their mission was to slow the German advance to allow time to evacuate the many thousands of soldiers on the beach.

An uneven fight

-  40,000 French
-  4,000 British
-  800,000 Germans



FIGHTERS SUPPORTED THE REARGUARD

The RAF bombed enemy positions and harassed German bombers.

Area defended by the British

Furnes to Nieuport Canal

FURNES

Dunkirk surrounded by Germans

BELGIUM

Second line of defence

For three days, the Allied rearguard held the outer perimeter of defence before retreating inwards. Like the outer perimeter, the second line made use of the terrain.



The soldiers dug **foxholes** behind the canals and used them to fire on the Germans with Bren machine guns.



Houses along the canals were fortified. The ancient city wall of Bergues was also upgraded with machine guns.



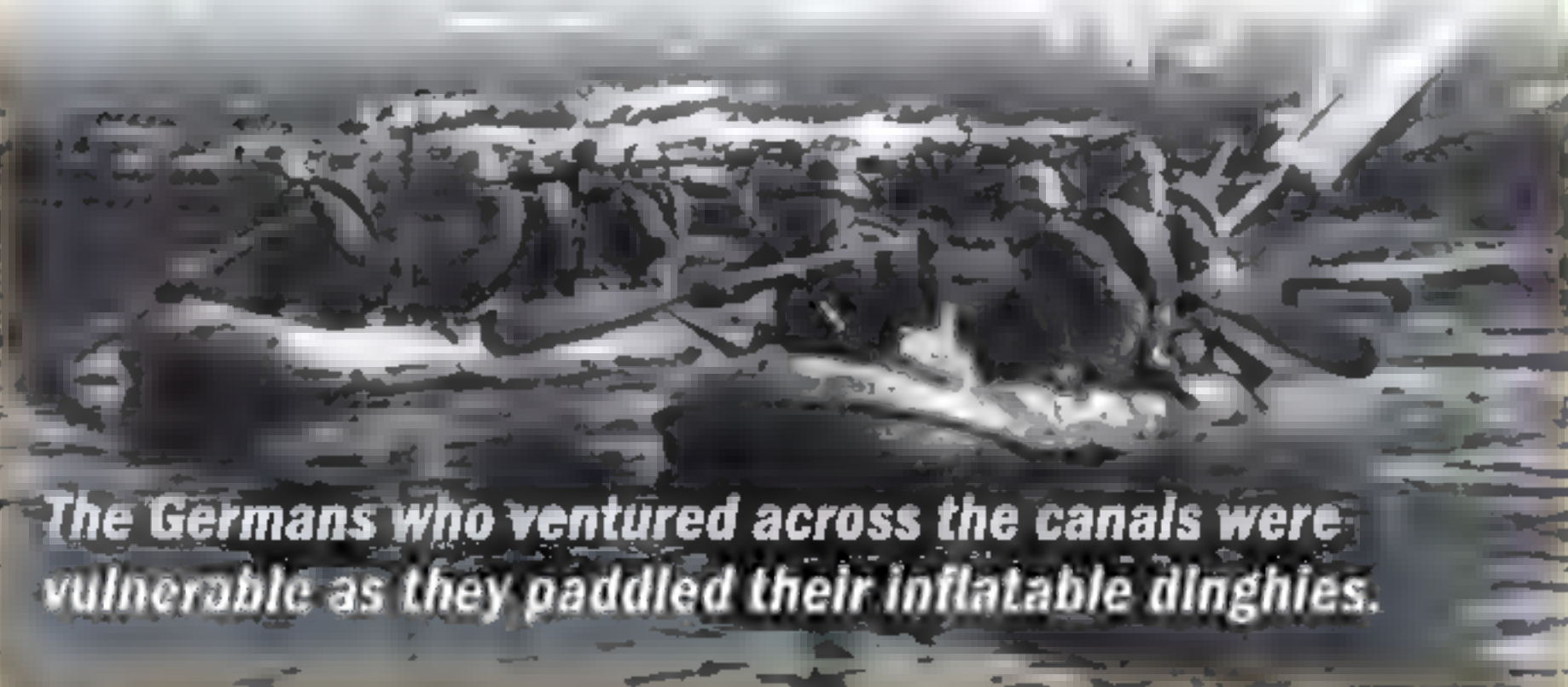
To slow down the German tanks, the Allies **opened the locks** and flooded the surrounding fields, turning them into swamps.



Old forts were put back into use. One of the defences used was built in the 17th century by the Sun King Louis XIV.



The Germans had to cross **canals** to reach the Allies' lines, leaving them vulnerable to snipers and machine guns.



The Germans who ventured across the canals were vulnerable as they paddled their inflatable dinghies.

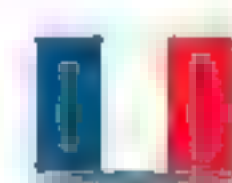
Thousands were rescued

The British used every means to save the soldiers from Dunkirk. Lorries were driven into the water to form piers. And fishing boats provided a shuttle service to help the men reach England.



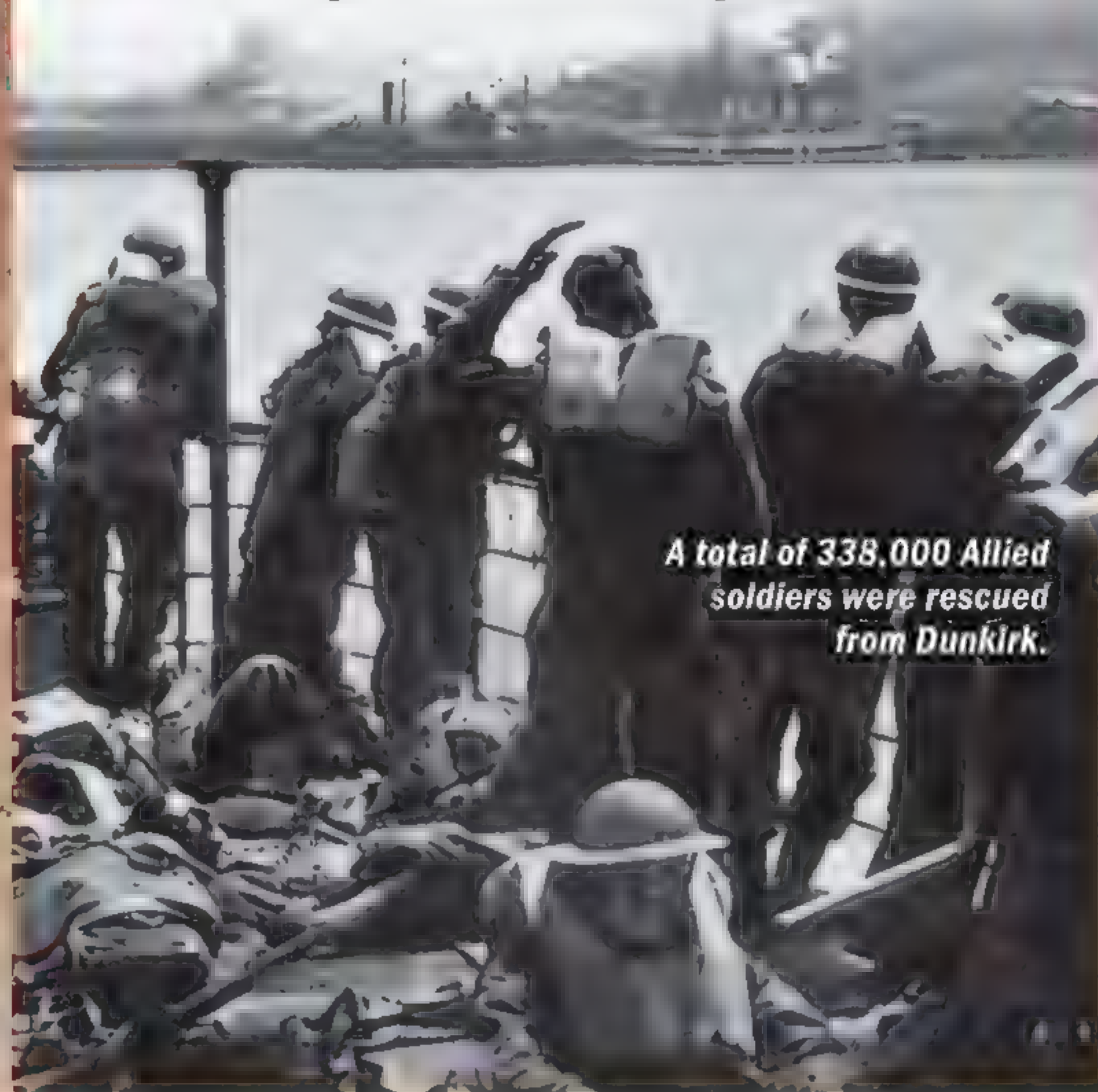
First in the lifeboats

The British realised relatively early on that France could not be defended against superior German forces. They began evacuating soldiers from Dunkirk as early as 27th May. A total of 193,000 British soldiers made it back to England.



Last evacuees

The final evacuees were French: a further 52,000 Gallic soldiers were rescued after the last British men had sailed from Dunkirk. 40,000 French troops continued to fight and never managed to reach the ships.



A total of 338,000 Allied soldiers were rescued from Dunkirk.

Germans surrounded the Allies

2

The Germans halt their advance on 24th May to give the soldiers a rest. The German pause gives the Allied rearguard time to fortify a large number of towns and farms.

1

The Germans cross the French border in mid-May 1940. Four days later, their most mobile forces reach the English Channel, surrounding up to 400,000 Allied soldiers.

ENGLAND

Dover

Calais

Dunkirk

Furnes

Wormhout

Cassel

Le Paradis

Lille

FRANCE

HOLLAND

BELGIUM

GERMANY

3

On 26th-28th May, the rearguard fights several battles at the bulwarks. They fight to the last bullet, giving the main force vital time to converge on Dunkirk.

comrade. It was a wise move: soon after, the pair heard shots and the shouting stopped. The two men survived by eating raw potatoes and drinking from puddles until the farm's owner returned and took pity on them.

On the same day as the massacre, 27th May, other rearguard troops were fighting to defend a canal between Ypres and Comines. Just before dawn, the German infantry crossed the canal in rubber dinghies and pushed the British back by over a kilometre. The British commander had no tanks, so in desperation, he led his men and unarmed crew carriers in a charge towards the Germans, counting on the tendency of defenders to overestimate an attacker's strength to cause panic. The ruse worked and the German infantrymen were flushed from machine gun nests and run over by the carriers.

The 27th May had been bloody for the British. Everywhere they were pushed back, but the effort had bought time for 7,669 soldiers to be evacuated.

The British fled Cassel

Against all odds, the British had held the town of Cassel, but by 29th May, resources were depleted. The streets were clogged with corpses, most of the buildings had been flattened and the survivors were running out of

ammunition. That was when Brigadier General Somerset learned of the large-scale evacuation underway along the coast. "I now fully realised that we were ... being sacrificed so that as many British and French [as possible] could get away," he later wrote.

"Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance"

WINSTON CHURCHILL

That same evening, the general's 450 men were finally ordered to head to Dunkirk. Under the cover of darkness, the long column headed out on foot, but they didn't get far. Half an hour later, they were being shelled, but without heavy weapons, they were forced to surrender. Most were killed, wounded or, like Somerset, captured.

Along the entire corridor, the British rearguard began retreating towards

Dunkirk. Once there, most were sent to the beach, but 4,000 British soldiers, together with their French comrades, regrouped to create a 30-kilometre fortified perimeter around the city. They had to hold the Germans for at least three days – 70,000 soldiers had already been evacuated, but nearly 300,000 were still waiting.

Over the next two days, the small force repelled numerous attacks, while soldiers were ferried to England. On 31st May, the British Grenadier Guards were caught in a bombardment in the town of Furnes (aka Veurne) in the eastern part of the defensive perimeter.

Signalman George Jones sought refuge with some comrades in a basement below the city's market square. "Someone ... found a portable wireless, and at around 2pm, we heard the news that 'over two-thirds of the forces encircled in the area of Dunkirk have now been evacuated'," Jones wrote in his memoirs. "Here we were miles inland, and virtually trapped in a town collapsing from bombardments ... It felt very lonely."

By this time on 31st May, around 200,000 soldiers had been evacuated, and the same evening the long-awaited order came for Jones' Grenadier Guards to head for the ships.

"In the bright glow of a hundred fires, we walked away from Furnes ... stumbling over piles of rubble, bricks, broken glass and tangled telephone wires, at last we were clear."

At dawn on 1st June, the Guards crowded onto the packed beach. But the British destroyers had had to anchor further out to sea to avoid the advancing Germans' guns; the men couldn't be picked up from the beach. Instead, signalled orders sent the men back to Dunkirk.

"Squadrons of Messerschmitts periodically attacked ... Wounded men [were] left on the sands to die or be drowned by the flood tide," recalled Major Colvin.

After several hours of marching, however, most of the Guards managed to board one of the ships.

Deserters were shot

"I was the last man out of Dunkirk." The British



Around 88,000 Allied soldiers never reached the Little Ships. They spent the rest of the war in German POW camps.

APRIL SCALA ARCHIVES

"And we'll fight them with broken beer bottles"

The escape from Dunkirk was frantic. In the rush, equipment worth millions of pounds had to be abandoned to save the men.

Thanks to the rearguard's fierce battle against superior forces, as many as 193,000 British soldiers were evacuated to their homeland, and a looming defeat turned into a symbol of Britain's fighting spirit.

But when the operation was over, the survivors did not have much left to fight with because they'd abandoned most of their equipment. When Winston Churchill addressed

parliament in June 1940, he assured the nation that Britain would continue to fight on land, by sea and in the air. However, after his famous speech, he allegedly whispered to a colleague: "And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got!"

However, Britain quickly rebuilt its army, in part thanks to weapons from the US.

The British left behind...



2,472 guns

Up to 60 percent of the army's artillery was left in France.



445 tanks

Fortunately for the British, a large proportion of the lost tanks were obsolete in any case.



63,879 lorries

According to *Dunkirk*, the shortage of lorries was so great that the army had to use scrapped buses.



20,548 motorcycles

Motorbikes were used by scouts and dispatch riders who carried messages between units.

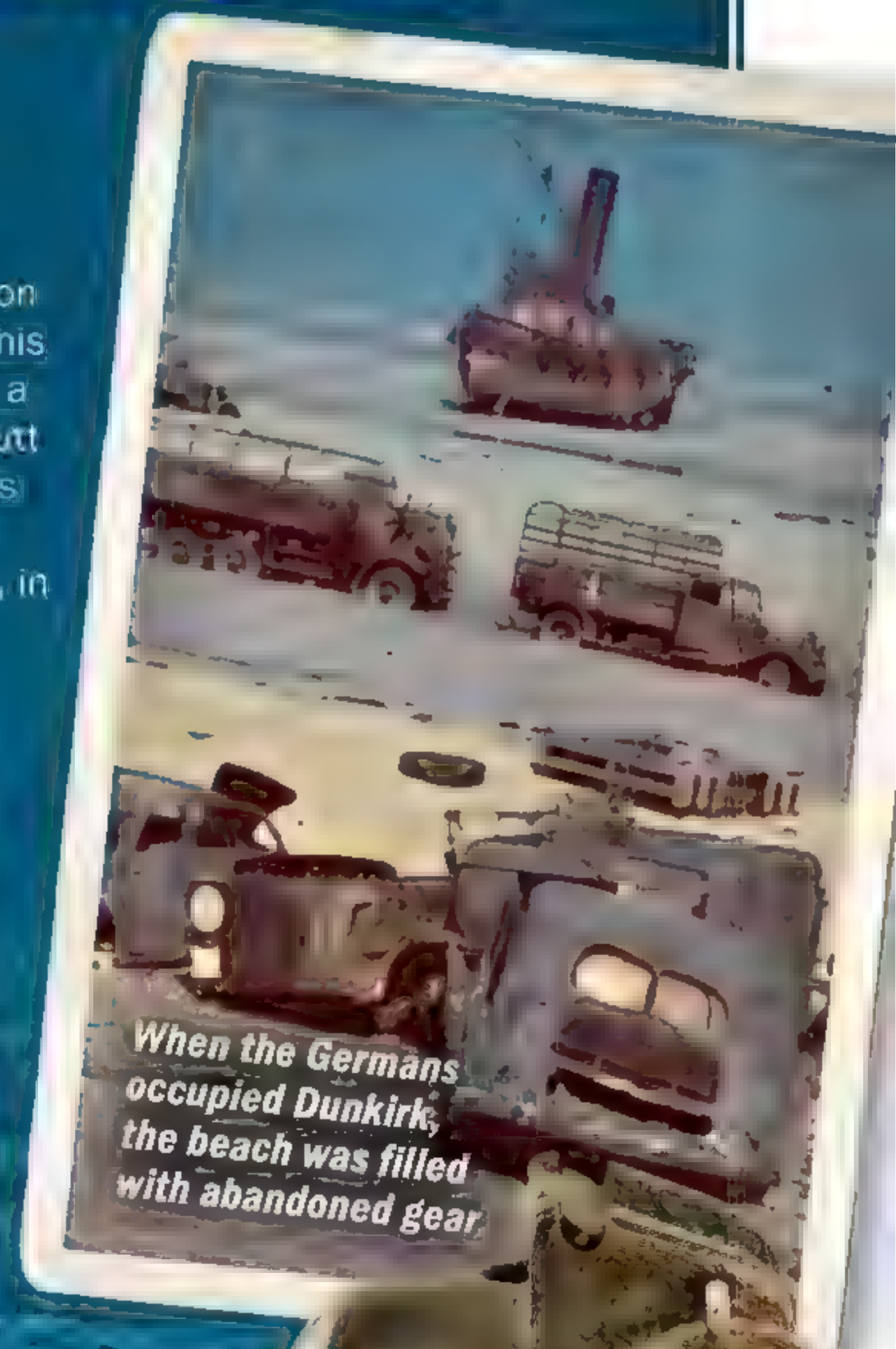


68,000 tonnes of ammunition

To replace what was lost, the British had to collect large quantities of ammunition from the colonies.

377,000 tonnes of equipment

The British tried to destroy what they left behind, but a large part fell into German hands.



Tonnes of ammunition boxes and shells were lost by the British.

soldier announced on 1st June over the crackling radio. Lieutenant Langley, four kilometres south of the port city, laughed at the words. Although 254,000 soldiers had sailed to safety, thousands were still waiting, and the 4,000 men in the rearguard were still defending Dunkirk. However, as the Germans edged nearer, some of the British started to get cold feet. Langley and a fellow officer were ordered to fire on their own side if they abandoned their posts. It wasn't long before a captain tried to sneak away.

"Our rifles went off simultaneously," Langley reported.

Soon, their position was swarming with Germans that the British machine

guns tried to fill with lead. Langley sniped five Germans from an attic before there was a mighty crash.

"A great wave of heat, dust and debris knocked me over," he later wrote. "A shell had burst on the roof. There was a long silence and I heard a small voice saying, 'I've been hit,' which I suddenly realised was mine."

Langley, injured in the arm and head, was evacuated immediately.

On the evening of 2nd June, the remnants of the British rearguard finally retreated to the heart of Dunkirk, while flooded meadows and 40,000 battle-hardened Frenchmen bought them time to get away. Shortly before 23.00, the last BEF soldiers

sailed away. A total of 193,000 Brits had been saved.

The British part of the operation was over, but over the next few days, the evacuation continued with the aim of rescuing French soldiers. As no German units had managed to fight their way into the centre of Dunkirk, a small number of British ships were sent in at night to pick up French troops. They succeeded in rescuing a further 52,000 French soldiers before the Germans finally succeeded in occupying the city on the morning of 4th June.

In all, the Battle of Dunkirk cost 11,000 British and French lives, but 338,000 Allied soldiers were saved to continue the fight against Hitler.



Mussolini's fleet was hit by veteran aircraft:

Italy's Pearl Harbor

During World War II, Mussolini's mighty fleet was anchored in Taranto – one of the world's best-protected ports. Italy's large battleships were a constant threat to British convoys in the Mediterranean, so the Royal Navy devised a bold plan to put Italy's pride out of the picture once and for all.



Around midnight on 11th November 1940, British torpedo planes attacked the Italian naval base at Taranto.

PHILIP E WEST - AVIATION ARTIST
WWW.AVIATIONFINEART.CO.UK

By Benjamin Alkærsg Christensen & Niels-Peter Granzow Busch
British pilot Kenneth Williamson took off in his old Swordfish biplane on a November night in 1940. Some way off on the horizon, he and his observer, Norman Scarlett, sitting right behind him, could clearly see tracers from the air defences at Taranto's naval base. Around 200 anti-aircraft guns and machine guns transformed the evening darkness into a beautiful but deadly display of glowing salvos.

Williamson signalled to the other 11 Swordfish aircraft that they had to break formation. With two other aircraft, he began to nosedive from an altitude of just over two kilometres. On its descent, the aircraft's speed increased from around 170 kilometres per hour to 360 km/h. In the open cockpit, the icy wind whipped at the

pilot's face. The plane had no altimeter, so he had to judge the altitude by sight; at about 100 metres, the three planes levelled off one by one and continued towards their respective targets. Ahead, Williamson glimpsed the small island of San Pietro, which marked the outer boundary of the port of Taranto.

As the 11-metre Swordfish passed over the island, several Italian anti-aircraft guns opened fire, but nothing hit the plane. Now that Williamson was inside the large harbour itself, he forced his aircraft down to a height of just nine metres and slowed down to around 165 km/h. In the distance, the pilot could finally make out his target – the battleships of the Italian Navy. In front of the giant warships, however, lay two smaller destroyers, whose anti-aircraft guns were now pumping a barrage of

shells towards the attacking aircraft at breakneck speed.

Williamson tilted the plane towards the huge silhouette of one of the Italian battleships and pressed the small release button on top of the throttle. Instantly, the 700-kilogram torpedo, which hung beneath the plane, was released. The two Britons flew so low that they could feel the foam spray as the torpedo hit the surface of the sea and headed off towards its target.

Now they were right in the middle of concentrated fire from hundreds of machine guns. If they were to survive, they had to get away – immediately. Meanwhile, one Swordfish after another attacked the warships. The Italians had felt safe in the port, protected by torpedo nets, searchlights and hundreds of anti-aircraft

»»

guns. But the attack was so important to Britain that even the loss of all the Swordfish aircraft would be acceptable.

Mission to secure Mediterranean

On 10th June 1940, Italy declared war on Britain, which at the time had been fighting Hitler's invasion forces in France for a month. And just a week after the Italian declaration of war, France surrendered.

Suddenly, Britain was completely alone in the defence of shipping in the Mediterranean. With Italy fighting on the German side, British shipping routes through the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal to India and the colonies in Southeast Asia were threatened. They had a naval force in the area, but it couldn't compete with that of Italy, which had large battleships, heavy cruisers and a multitude of destroyers and submarines. It was clear to the Royal Navy that something had to be done – and quickly.

However, the *Regia Marina* (Italian Navy) would not allow itself to be drawn into an open naval battle, because the Royal Navy, with its aircraft carriers and associated planes, would be too strong in such a scenario.

The Italians had no aircraft carriers, but their large battleships would easily be able to split up British convoys. And that threat alone was enough for Britain to conclude that the Italian battleships had to be taken out of the equation.

The Royal Navy therefore decided to dust off some old plans from 1935. At the time, Italy had been at war with Ethiopia, and Britain, who had major interests in East Africa, prepared a surprise attack using torpedo planes against the Italian fleet, while it was anchored in the port of Taranto. The plan was very risky, and the commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Dudley Pound, expected the participating aircraft carrier and its planes to be lost during the mission. But it was a sacrifice he was willing to make if they were able to destroy a number of Italian battleships.

But before Admiral Pound could put his plan into action, the Mediterranean fleet's only large aircraft carrier was transferred to the North Sea, after which only the smaller carrier, *Eagle*, was left – and it didn't have enough aircraft to carry out the attack.

The attack was postponed

Shortly after shelving the attack plans, Admiral Pound was relocated to Britain and replaced by Admiral Andrew Cunningham, who – like many other naval personnel at the time – was a known opponent of the use of aircraft in naval operations. As one of his officers later recalled, Cunningham appeared to consider aircraft carriers and their planes as “second rate to the rest of the fleet”.

The carriers' Swordfish aircraft were particularly unpopular among naval officers. Developed for the navy in the early 1930s, the slow biplanes were obsolete before the first ones were even delivered. But the machines were some

of the only planes in the fleet that could take off and land on an aircraft carrier while also carrying a torpedo or bomb load.

Admiral Cunningham summoned his officers to a meeting in September 1940 to discuss an attack on the Italian Navy: “Gentlemen, I

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



Mussolini wanted to create a new 'Roman Empire' in the Mediterranean region. His plan stood in Britain's way.

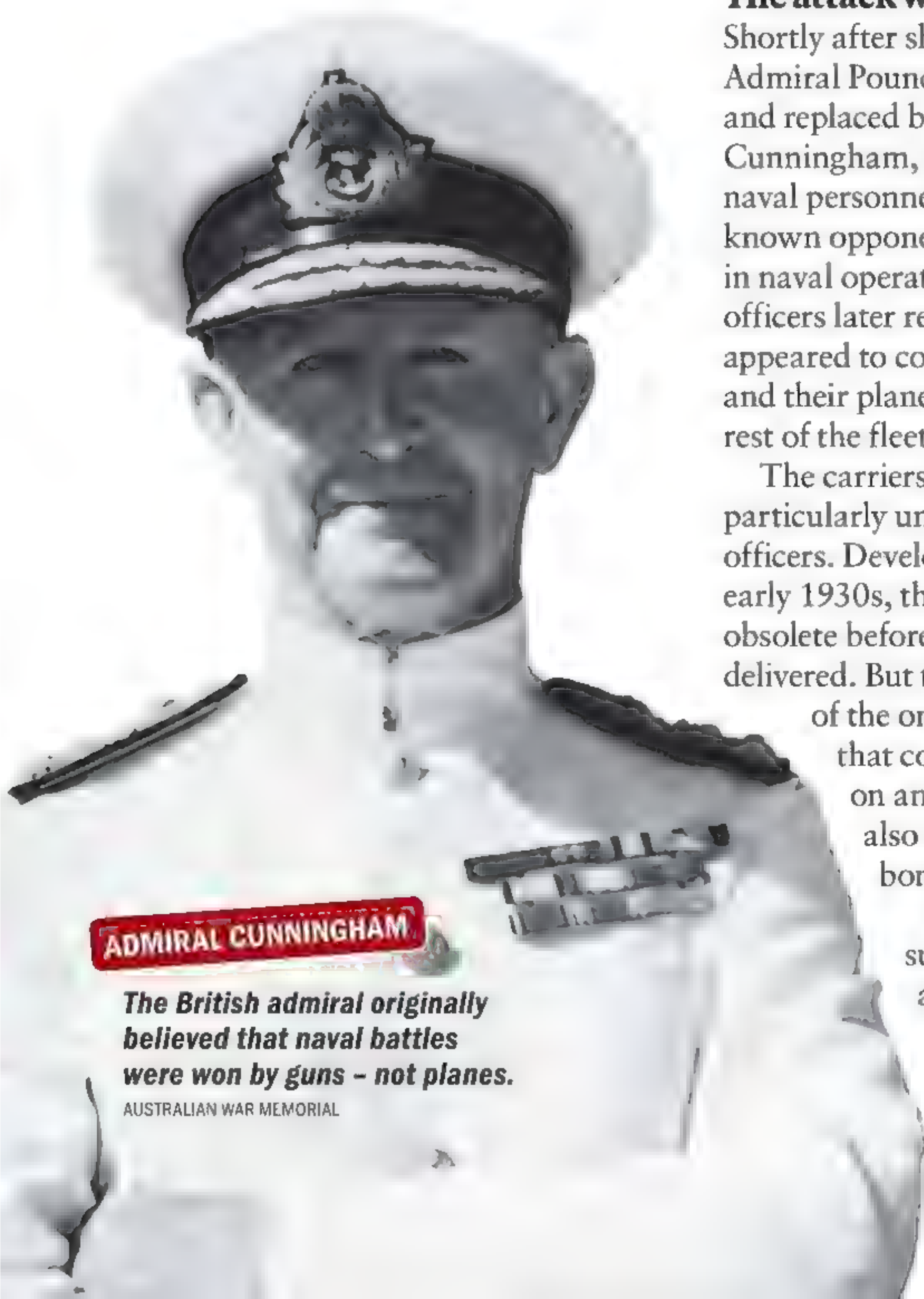
have called you together for I want your advice on how we can best annoy the enemy.”

The officers agreed that because Mussolini's battleships refused to leave the protective defences of the Taranto naval base, Britain had to go to them instead. And – despite Admiral Cunningham's scepticism – that could only be done with the veteran Swordfish planes. The aircraft carrier *Illustrious* had just arrived in the Mediterranean, so it was now possible for more aircraft to take off. However, the large ships would be extremely exposed in the event of counter-attacks by the Italian Air Force. Therefore, it was decided to attack at night, which would also improve the chances of success for the slow torpedo planes. The date of the attack was set for 21st October, the anniversary of the British naval victory at Trafalgar during the Napoleonic Wars.

The attack fleet gathered in Egypt, from where it was to sail towards Italy under the pretence of being en route to the British colony of Malta, keeping the Italians in the dark so they didn't move their fleet to safety further north.

Planes exploded in a sea of flames

From the beginning, the mission was plagued by accidents. Even before the fleet left Egypt, the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* lost several planes when mechanics installed extra fuel tanks on the aircraft so they could complete the 300-kilometre trip. A spark ignited a fuel tank, and one of the planes aboard *Illustrious* exploded in a sea of flames that quickly spread. Two Swordfish



The British admiral originally believed that naval battles were won by guns – not planes.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

were lost in the fire, while five others were damaged.

It was impossible to repair the damaged planes before 21st October, so the attack was postponed until 31st October. However, this meant that the pilots wouldn't have the full moon to help, as planned. The attack force would instead be completely dependent on flares to illuminate the enemy fleet.

It was too risky, so once again the attack was postponed. In the end, Britain decided on the night between 11th and 12th November, when there would again be sufficient moonlight.

Meanwhile, accidents continued to plague the Navy. Shortly after leaving the port of Alexandria, the small aircraft carrier *Eagle* had to turn around because of a fault. Although six of *Eagle's* aircraft were transferred to the somewhat larger *Illustrious*, the fleet's flight strength was greatly reduced. Only 24 Swordfish aircraft were now left to take part in the attack.

Deadly reconnaissance

Illustrious sailed from Alexandria, heading for Italy, on 6th November 1940, protected by accompanying warships. En route to the target, the attack had to be planned down to the smallest detail. In order not to arouse suspicion, Britain had tried to keep the number of reconnaissance flights over the port of Taranto to a minimum. But now the mission was underway, it was crucial that the pilots found out exactly which ships were in the harbour and where they would be located.

The task fell to the experienced pilot Adrian Warburton who, the day before the attack, took off in a surveillance aircraft to photograph Taranto's naval base in daylight. However, cloud cover forced Warburton to make a deadly flight at low altitude. At just 15 metres above sea level, he flew over the harbour in a hail of anti-aircraft shells, noting the names of five Italian battleships, 14 cruisers and 27 destroyers, as well as their precise positions. The low-altitude flight turned out to be a blessing in disguise for Warburton, because it made it difficult for the surprised Italians, who usually shot at high-flying targets, to aim at the plane. And Warburton took full >>>

The Italian Navy had several hundred submarines and warships, the strongest of which were six large battleships.

NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

Italy's fleet threatened Britain in Egypt

Britain was hugely reliant on being able to bring supplies unhindered through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal to its troops in Egypt.

After the surrender of France at the end of June 1940, Britain was in a predicament. So far, the Allies had been able to keep Italy in check in the Mediterranean, where there were plenty of French warships. But now Britain was alone, and the vast majority of its ships were needed in the Atlantic to counter the threat from Nazi Germany.

However, Italy had large forces in Libya, which bordered British-controlled Egypt. If the Italians attacked, the British in North Africa would be

dependent on supplies from outside. The British convoy routes to Egypt, as well as through the Suez Canal to India, crossed the Italian convoy routes to Libya, and Mussolini's fleet therefore posed a threat.

In the months following the Italian declaration of war, Italian and British warships confronted each other on three occasions without a decisive victory. So, Britain decided to eliminate the threat by attacking Italy's naval base in Taranto.

MEDITERRANEAN SUPERPOWER

Italy's air force and navy had rearmed under Mussolini and could therefore dominate the heart of the Mediterranean.

SUPPLIES TO EGYPT

Britain feared that the Italians would succeed in stopping British convoys to Egypt.

- 0 250 500 km
- ➔ Italian convoy routes
 - ➔ British convoy routes
 - ✈ Italian air bases
 - ✈ British air bases



SUPPLIES TO LIBYA

Italian cargo and warships regularly crossed the Mediterranean to supply the country's troops in Libya.

advantage of the fact. In fact, he flew so low that he subsequently discovered that the remains of a radio antenna from one of the Italian warships were stuck in the plane's landing gear. On the way back, Warburton was hotly pursued by an Italian fighter jet – but it eventually had to abandon the chase.

The next day, Warburton piloted his plane over Taranto once more. This time, he flew high above the harbour to take pictures that could identify the location of the torpedo nets and barrage balloons that protected the port and its ships.

Thanks to Warburton's observations, the Royal Navy was able to make a comprehensive plan of the port,

detailing all the major ships and fortifications. To the satisfaction of the British, they were able to ascertain that all six of the Italian Navy's large battleships were in the harbour.

Specially adapted torpedoes

In the reconnaissance photos, British officers were able to spot the many torpedo nets that were laid out in the port to stop underwater torpedoes reaching the ships. The nets went as far below the surface as the ships' keels. So, torpedoes that went under the nets would – in theory – also go under the ships without damaging them.

But Britain had an ace up its sleeve. Its torpedoes had been fitted with a new

magnetic trigger, which automatically detonated the torpedo as it passed under a ship's metal hull. Although the ship's keel was several metres from the torpedo, the explosive force was still enough to break the keel and tear a hole in the hull.

The torpedo nets were set up in the harbour to protect against submarine attacks. The Italians hadn't considered it necessary to protect against torpedo attacks from planes. It was common knowledge that torpedoes dropped from aircraft required a sea depth of at least 23 metres, otherwise the torpedo would hit the seabed.

As the port of Taranto was only 12 metres deep, it would be impossible to

The Swordfish was designed to be able to take off from aircraft carriers with a bomb or a torpedo.

TOP PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

Vintage plane was Britain's best torpedo bomber

With its two pairs of wings and a top speed of just 223 km/h, the Swordfish was hopelessly outdated – but it still proved effective.

In 1940, the Royal Navy's most widely used bomber and torpedo aircraft was the ageing but reliable Fairey Swordfish biplane, which – due to the many types of weapons the aircraft could be equipped with – was nicknamed Stringbag. The Swordfish was small and robust enough to land on British aircraft carriers, and could be armed with bombs and torpedoes. The primitive biplane could be

hit multiple times before suffering serious damage. It was made of a thin wood-and-metal skeleton, covered with fabric, so if the aircraft was hit, the shells often went straight through rather than exploding, as they would do when hitting a solid surface.

With a top speed of just 223 km/h, the plane was too slow to outrun enemy aircraft, so pilots developed special

tactics to survive. Many simply avoided enemy aircraft by nosediving down to sea level. The enemy's fast fighters would often whizz past the slow aircraft, perhaps even crashing into the waves, while the Swordfish pilot had plenty of time to level his plane and get away. Despite the outdated design, the aircraft remained in service throughout World War II.



damage the ships with torpedoes dropped from planes. But the British had even found a way around this. They placed a drum with a thin steel wire tied to the tip of the torpedo beneath the planes. When the weapon was dropped from the plane, the wire pulled the tip of the torpedo upwards, so that instead of sinking deep underwater, it belly-flopped, after which the wire released its grip on the torpedo.

As well as torpedo nets, Italian warships were also defended by barrage balloons, tethered to the ground with long steel cables. In the dark, the cables were difficult to see, and if a plane hit them, its wings would be cut off. The Italians had also lined up around 200

anti-aircraft guns and machine guns, all of which would fire at the planes.

This was all explained to the 42 pilots and observers in the final briefing before the attack. Few of them, after reviewing the defences, were confident that they would escape unscathed. So, when the officer who had briefed them about the mission began talking about plans for the return trip after the attack, one pilot interrupted him:

"Don't let's bother about that," he joked, after which a nervous laugh broke out among the rest of the pilots.

Attack began with accidents

The unfortunate incidents that had plagued the preparations for the attack

continued. The day before the attack, two *Illustrious* reconnaissance planes crashed without warning. Salt water had got into the on-board fuel tanks, so much of the carrier's fuel reserves for the planes was destroyed. This meant that the aircraft possessed barely enough fuel to complete the mission.

The attack was to be carried out in two waves. The first consisted of 12 planes, two of which were to drop flares to light up the harbour. Four other planes with ordinary bombs were to attack targets on land or near the port to create confusion, while six planes armed with torpedoes would attack the warships. The second wave consisted of nine aircraft, two of which were to drop flares, two would drop bombs, while five were armed with torpedoes.

For the pilots in the second wave, the chances of surviving the attack were even smaller, because there would be no chance of catching the Italians off guard after the first wave's attack. However, two of the planes in the second wave didn't even get that far. One plane damaged its wing on the deck of the aircraft carrier, so could only take off half an hour after the others. The other aircraft lost its extra fuel tank shortly after take-off and had to turn around. Even before the attack had started, the total attack force had been reduced to just 20 aircraft – and before long, they would also lose the element of surprise.

Attack began prematurely

During the evening, warning sirens had howled twice over Taranto's naval base. The Italians had no radar around the port, but had listening posts instead, which reported hearing enemy planes. And they were right. According to the plan, the British attack was to begin at 23:00, but on the way, one of the planes got separated from the rest, so reached the port quarter of an hour too early.

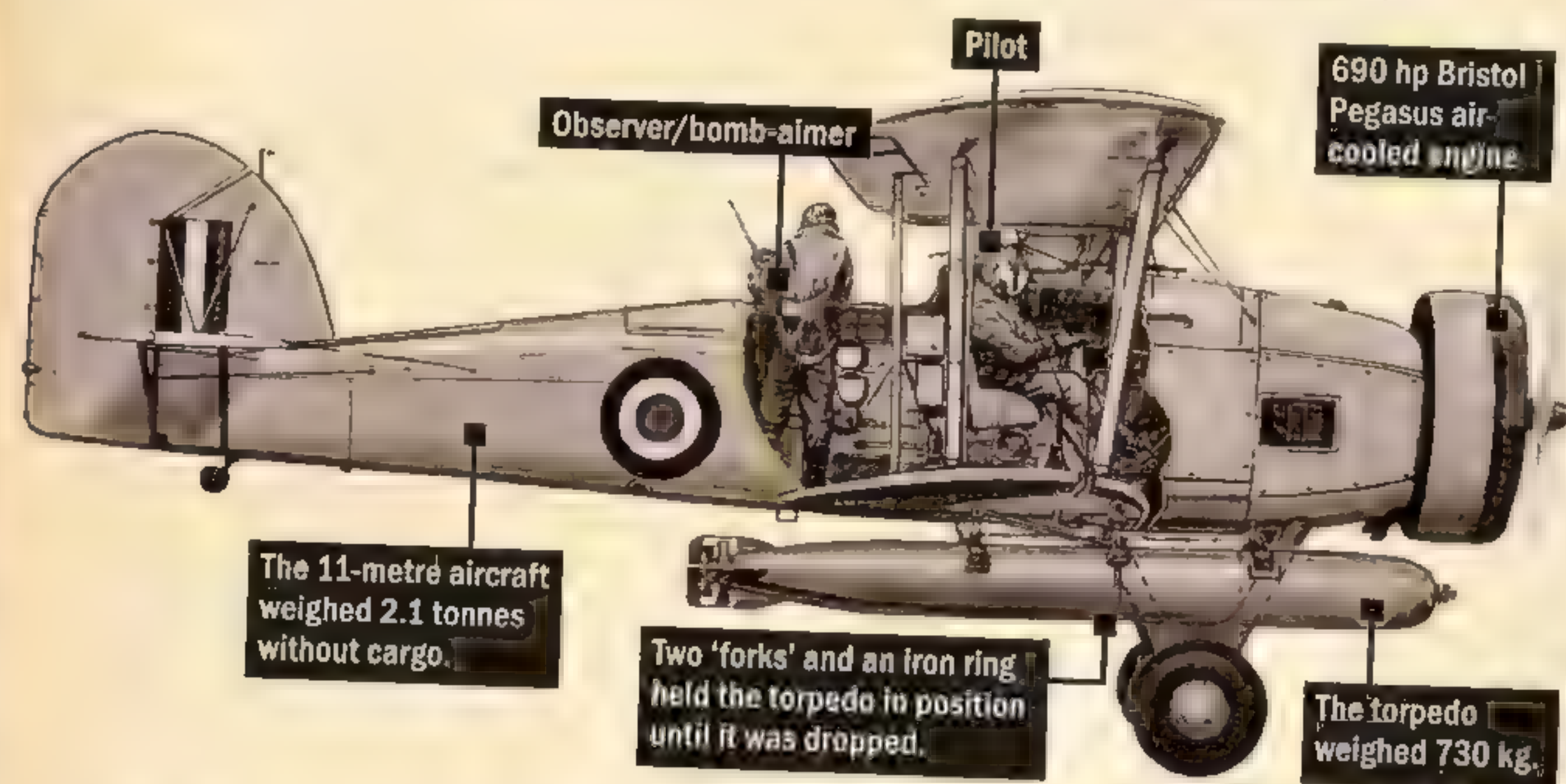
The sound of the lone plane circling over the harbour while waiting for the others prompted the Italians' anti-aircraft defences to spring into action. The sky over Taranto was cut through by thousands of tracers that lit up the night. For the pilots in the first wave of Swordfish planes, it was clear they'd lost any chance of surprising the Italians.

The attack was launched by two planes dropping flares over the south-eastern part of the harbour. The >>>

Swordfish pilots were masters of torpedo attacks

By the start of the war, the Swordfish aircraft was severely outdated, but it was surprisingly effective when attacking enemy ships. The pilots were specially trained in torpedo attacks, which required great manoeuvrability, but also

enormous daring. The torpedoes had to be dropped just a few metres above sea level and at a low speed. This meant that pilots en route to a target were extremely vulnerable when the enemy's anti-aircraft guns went on the counter-attack.



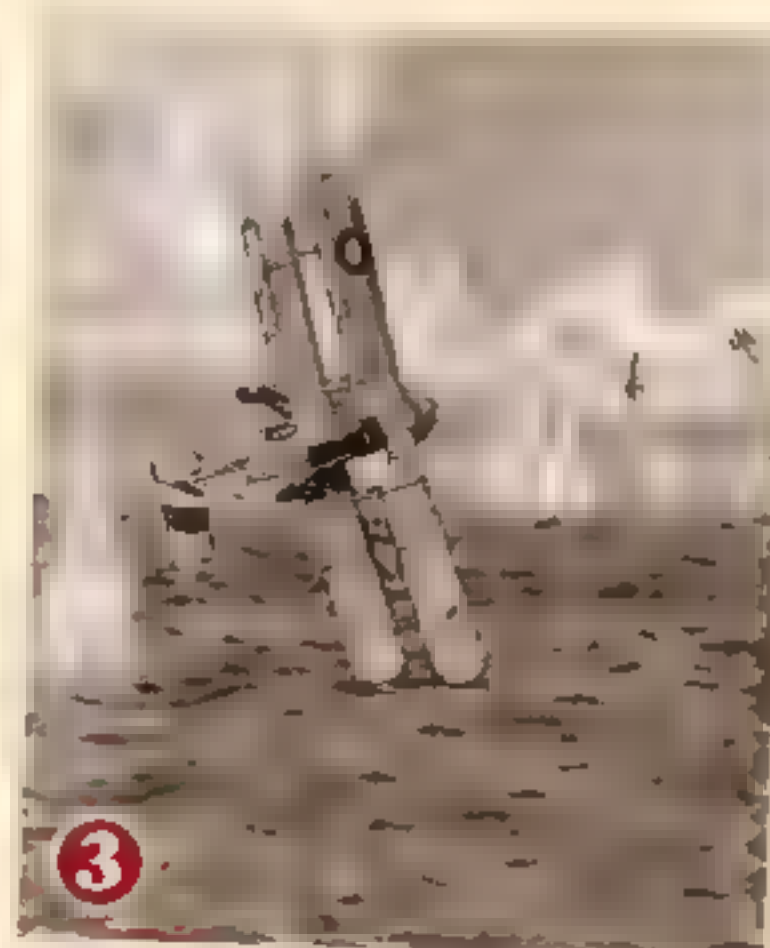
Nosedive launched attack on enemy ships



1 At the beginning of an attack, Swordfish planes first hid above the clouds, then nosedived in formation towards the sea.



2 At the surface, the pilot levelled the plane and flew towards the target horizontally until the torpedo was dropped.



3 The moment the torpedo was dropped, the pilot tilted the aircraft to escape enemy fire.

Torpedo aircraft practised on former ally

One month after France's surrender in June 1940, Britain decided to neutralise the French Navy – with Swordfish aircraft, among others.

Before Britain dared to attack Italian warships in the port of Taranto, it wanted evidence that the benefits of a torpedo attack by aircraft on warships in port would outweigh the risks. They received the proof they needed in July 1940, when the Royal Navy attacked France's warships in several locations, including Algeria and Senegal.

Britain attacked its former ally because it feared that French warships

would fall into German hands after France's surrender.

British warships took the lead in the attack, but Swordfish planes were also deployed. In the port of Dakar in Senegal, six Swordfish managed to neutralise the French warship *Richelieu* with a torpedo. Elsewhere, in the Algerian port of Mers El Kébir, a British torpedo plane managed to damage the battleship *Dunkirk*.



The raid on France's warships in the Algerian port of Mers El Kébir was launched by British battleships. Later, Swordfish planes also attacked.

flares illuminated the port from inland, so the subsequent planes could clearly see the silhouettes of the ships. Pilot Richard Janvrin remembered missiles being fired around the two planes:

"One just sort of went through it and it made no great impression. One didn't think that they would ever hit you."

After the drop, Janvrin was able to turn his attention to the rest of the first wave of attacks that was now raging over the Italian ships. His gaze followed Kenneth Williamson's lead plane, which slowly flew on and on until Williamson, in the midst of the onslaught of anti-aircraft shells, dropped his torpedo then attempted to retreat.

As Williamson and his observer, Scarlett, turned the plane, however, one of their wings hit the sea.

"I just fell out of the back [of the plane] into the sea. We were only about

20 feet up. It wasn't very far to drop," recalled Scarlett.

While the observer lay in the water, Williamson also appeared, and together they clung to the crashed plane.

"Chaps ashore were shooting [at the plane]. The water was boiling."

What the two Britons didn't yet know was that their 730-kilogram torpedo had hit the battleship *Conte di Cavour*, which was sinking. Williamson and Scarlett quickly swam away from the wreckage of their plane and found safety on a floating dock in the harbour.

Meanwhile, the first wave of attacks continued. Two torpedo planes missed their target, while the leader of another attack group managed to hit the large battleship *Littorio* with a torpedo. The last plane in the first wave was flown by Lieutenant Maund, whose aircraft approached the port by flying low over

Taranto, heading towards an inner harbour called Mar Piccolo: "I open the throttle wide and head for the mouth of the Mar Piccolo. ... Then it is as all hell comes tumbling in on top of us."

Anti-aircraft guns from the warships in the harbour, as well as from the coast of Mar Piccolo, were now trying with all their might to shoot down the British plane before it could drop its cargo. However, the Italian guns had a problem with the low-flying aircraft, because it forced them to shoot so low that they risked hitting the ships in the harbour. That fact helped Lieutenant Maund, who selected a battleship and set out to attack.

"The water is close beneath our wheels, so close I am wondering which is to happen first – the torpedo going or our hitting the sea – then we level out, and almost without thought the button is pressed and a jerk tells me that the 'fish' is gone," Maund reported. He was aiming for the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*, but the vessel was in luck. The British torpedo hit the seabed before it could reach the keel of the warship.

The first wave lasted almost 40 minutes. The 12 aircraft managed to hit two of the Italian battleships and only a single plane had been lost. But the attack was not over yet.

Second wave began

When the second wave reached Taranto, the pilots were greeted by a frightening sight. Several described the air above the harbour as a "volcano" of anti-aircraft fire, as the Italian listening posts had picked up the sound of the second wave of torpedo planes. Only seven out of nine aircraft were left in the attack due to accidents on the way, but they doggedly began their mission. Again, the attack was launched with flares, then torpedoes and bombs rained down on the ships in the port.

The first plane attacked the large battleship *Littorio*, which had already been hit during the first wave. Now the battleship was hit by another torpedo. With difficulty, the Allied aircraft avoided being broken up by a barrage balloon before returning home. Another plane attacked *Littorio*, which was now hit for the third time.

Less fortunate were the two Britons aboard the Swordfish E4H, which went on the attack against the heavy cruiser

Gorizia. When the plane was about to attack, it was hit by anti-aircraft guns and tumbled blazing into the harbour.

Shortly after, a plane attacked the large battleship *Caio Duilio*, which was hit by a torpedo. The plane flew so low that it barely missed a fishing boat before escaping under heavy fire. One of the few undamaged battleships in the port, *Vittorio Veneto*, was attacked again. In the first wave, the ship had avoided being hit, and even now, when a brave pilot approached at a distance of just 450 metres before dropping his torpedo, the ship's luck held: the torpedo got stuck in a sandbank. The *Swordfish* was damaged, but miraculously stayed in the air.

The last aircraft in the second wave was flown by Lieutenant Clifford, who bombed a number of warships in the harbour. When he dropped the bombs, however, they mysteriously failed to explode. It turned out that most of them ended up in the water, while just one actually hit the cruiser *Trento*, but the bomb went right through the deck of the warship without exploding. The attack on Taranto was over.

Everyone feared the worst

Each plane had to find its own way home to the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*. No one had a clear idea of how it had gone, and when two of the *Swordfish* planes that had dropped flares during the attack made contact with each other via radio, they were convinced that the attack had turned into a massacre.

"We may be the only survivors. ... I doubt whether any of the torpedo or



Many *Swordfish* pilots assumed the Taranto attack would cost them their lives, so were overjoyed at the small number of losses.

bombing pilots got away with that," said one pilot sadly.

On board the *Illustrious*, officers were also worried about how badly it had gone. Many had expected it to be a suicide mission. But then two planes appeared, then another, and over the course of the next hour, one plane after another – suffering from varying degrees of damage – returned to *Illustrious*. Only two planes were missing. The mission had cost two pilots their lives, while Kenneth Williamson and his observer, Scarlett, ended up in Italian captivity.

The Italian losses, on the other hand, had been far more serious. The battleships *Littorio*, *Caio Duilio* and *Conte di Cavour* had all been hit, while three cruisers and two destroyers had

suffered major damage. The port's seaplane base had also been damaged by bombs, and the tanks containing oil for the ships were on fire.

With the attack on Taranto, 21 outdated torpedo planes had put half of the large battleships in Italy's fleet out of action for several months. The attack made it clear that battleships – which had previously been the strongest weapon of any fleet – were largely defenceless against an attack from an aircraft carrier's planes. Going forward, aircraft carriers became a navy's most important weapon – the age of the battleship was over.

Satisfied, Admiral Cunningham, who had previously been more than sceptical about the use of aircraft in naval operations, stated: "Taranto, and the night of 11th–12th November 1940, should be remembered for ever as having shown once and for all that in the Fleet Air Arm the Navy has its most devastating weapon."

The admiral also had no doubt that the Italian Navy would no longer be a threat: "I don't think their remaining three battleships will face us and if they do I'm quite prepared to take them on with only two."

The British prime minister, Winston Churchill, was also pleased: "The result affects decisively the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean."

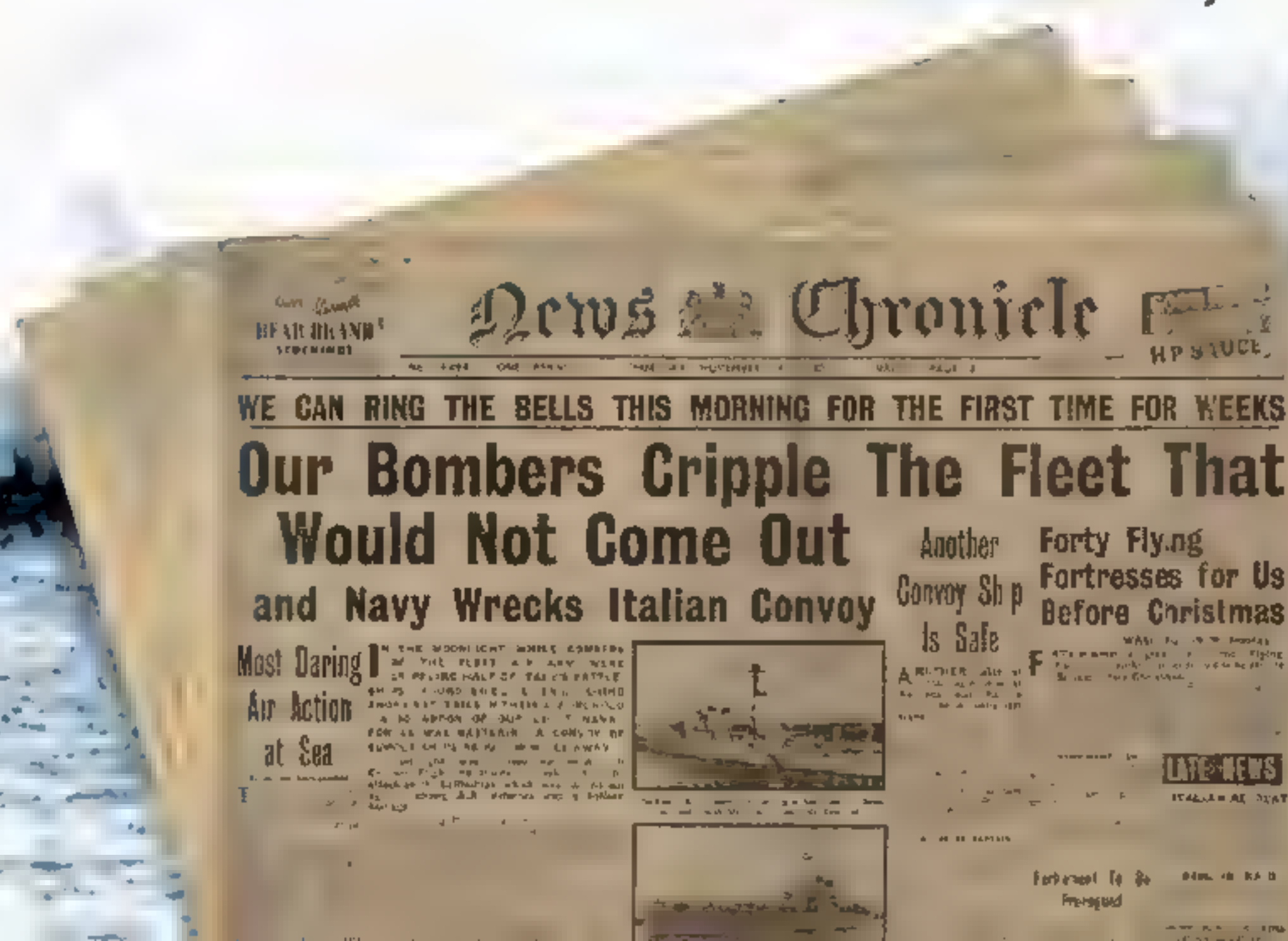
Japanese naval officers appeared to agree, too, and the following year, they copied the British attacks with even greater success when they wiped out large parts of the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

During the attack, the Italian battleship *Conte di Cavour* was sunk, while two other battleships were damaged by torpedoes.

IMAGESELECT



Back in Britain, the newspapers celebrated the successful attack on the Italian Navy.



The German general stayed with his troops at the front so he could quickly take advantage of developing opportunities.

GETTY IMAGES & ULLSTEIN BILD

ERWIN ROMMEL

Rommel outwitted the British in the Sahara

Desert Fox

The odds seemed impossible when Erwin Rommel arrived in North Africa in 1941. The British were winning victories everywhere, and Germany's Italian allies were useless. But the panzer general's strategies were a potent weapon and soon even the enemy came to admire the Desert Fox's guile.

The British are pushed back 1,800 kilometres



By Claus Cancel

Lucia Rommel could tell that something was wrong even before her husband opened his mouth. The couple was at home, near Ulm, when two officers arrived. Having talked to the pair alone, General Erwin Rommel stepped out of the room to speak to his wife.

"In a quarter of an hour I shall be dead," he said bitterly. It was 14th October 1944, and the officers had just informed him that he was suspected of being part of the failed conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on 20th July. Rommel had been given two choices: go to Berlin to plead innocence before the Führer, or commit suicide immediately to save his reputation and avoid reprisals against his family. Rommel knew that there was

really only one option, however: suicide. The offer to make his case in Berlin was a cover, one that he wouldn't survive. He had expressed his dissatisfaction with Hitler's strategies once too often.

"They have brought the poison," Rommel told his wife of 28 years. "It will take only three seconds to act."

Lucia begged him desperately to fight back, but there was no way out. Finally, they came together in a silent embrace.

When the couple's 15-year-old son, Manfred, appeared, Rommel told him what he had just confided to his mother.

"To die by the hand of one's own people is hard. But the house is surrounded and Hitler is charging me with high treason. 'In view of my services in Africa,'" he said,

sarcastically quoting one of the visiting officers, "I am to have the chance of dying by poison... If I accept, none of the usual steps will be taken against my family, that is, against you. They will also leave my staff alone."

Rommel was escorted from the house moments later. He shook his son's hand one last time and then climbed into the waiting car. Rommel didn't look back as it disappeared down the driveway.

Five minutes later, the driver pulled over. Rommel swallowed the poison and a moment after, Germany's legendary Desert Fox was dead.

Rapid strikes were his speciality

The myths that later built up around Rommel were seeded during World >>>

War I, where he first demonstrated his unique sense of battlefield tactics.

Born in southern Germany, he joined an officer school in 1910, aged 18, on the advice of his father.

After graduating, he became a lieutenant and was in command of a detachment when he received his baptism of fire on 22nd August 1914 in a French village called Bleid. Rommel had advanced through dense fog to the edge of the village, where he hid the bulk of his unit before going on alone with three others.

Soon the party spied 15 French soldiers chatting and drinking coffee. Rommel and his three companions opened fire, and before the surprised men could reach cover, two or three of them were down. Fearless, Rommel stormed forward with his men.

However, they were soon forced to retreat by a hail of bullets from houses

within the village. The place was occupied by far more soldiers than Rommel and his scouts had realised.

Back with the rest of his unit, Rommel considered the situation:

"Should I wait until other forces came up or storm the entrance of Bleid with my platoon?" he wrote later about his two choices. "The latter course of action seemed proper."

Rommel stormed into Bleid with his division and took advantage of the moment of surprise to drive the French out of town. The battle taught him a vital lesson: numbers were less important in battle than courage, initiative and determination.

During World War I, Rommel also discovered how disorganised and weak a unit on the run is. He used this knowledge, among other things, in the Battle of Longarone, in northern Italy, in 1917. At that time, Rommel had

command of around 500 trained mountain troops, whom he led forward at such a pace that they outmanoeuvred a far greater force of Italians.

The operation ended with a 10,000-strong Italian unit surrendering because the troops thought they were surrounded. Rommel lost just six men.

The Desert Fox landed in Africa

It was exactly this type of initiative-bordering-on-recklessness that became Rommel's hallmark in North Africa in World War II, after rising to the rank of general and leading a panzer division to enormous success in France in 1940.

Rommel's obvious talent was the reason Hitler chose to send him to North Africa in February 1941 with orders to save the Italians stationed there. Hitler's allies had tried to take Egypt from the British, but had instead suffered a catastrophic defeat. The

DESERT FOX TRICKS: PACE DECIDES A BATTLE

First victory

With Operation Sonnenblume (Sunflower) in 1941, Rommel proved that tank warfare was all about speed.

German-Italian forces broke through the British front on 1st April 1941 and accelerated forward. The slow-moving British generals were given no time to organise a new defence.



Italians had lost half of Libya, and German reinforcements had to be urgently dispatched across the Mediterranean to prevent the British from taking the rest of the Italian colony. The mission was defensive, and Rommel was ordered not to launch an offensive against the enemy.

The German general only had a small force to send into battle in any case. The armoured unit consisted of just 150 tanks, many of them small and light models unsuitable for attacking a powerful enemy.

Rommel, however, did his utmost to make his strength seem greater than it was. Knowing the Italian base in Tripoli was full of British spies, Rommel ordered a parade as soon as he arrived.

Rommel's tanks roared through the city with exhaust fumes belching out behind them. Once each unit reached the edge of the city, it swung around and returned to the starting point via small roads out of view of the spectators. The armoured column then drove through the city a second time. As planned, the British agents reported a substantial number of tanks were now sited in Libya.

Rommel showed similar cunning when he disobeyed his orders and attacked the British. He ordered a convoy of lorries and other vehicles to follow his line of tanks during their advance to help create a large dust cloud that suggested a much greater force was advancing. Some vehicles were even disguised with wooden boards so that, from a distance, they resembled real tanks.

The British abandoned their positions and scurried back eastwards.

British couldn't take the pace

Hitler had placed Rommel in an unusual position with respect to his allies. General Italo Gariboldi, commander-in-chief of the Italian Army in North Africa, outranked Rommel and had far more troops. However, after a series of Italian defeats, it was inconceivable that a victorious German panzer general should be under Gariboldi's command. An agreement was therefore reached that while Gariboldi formally had

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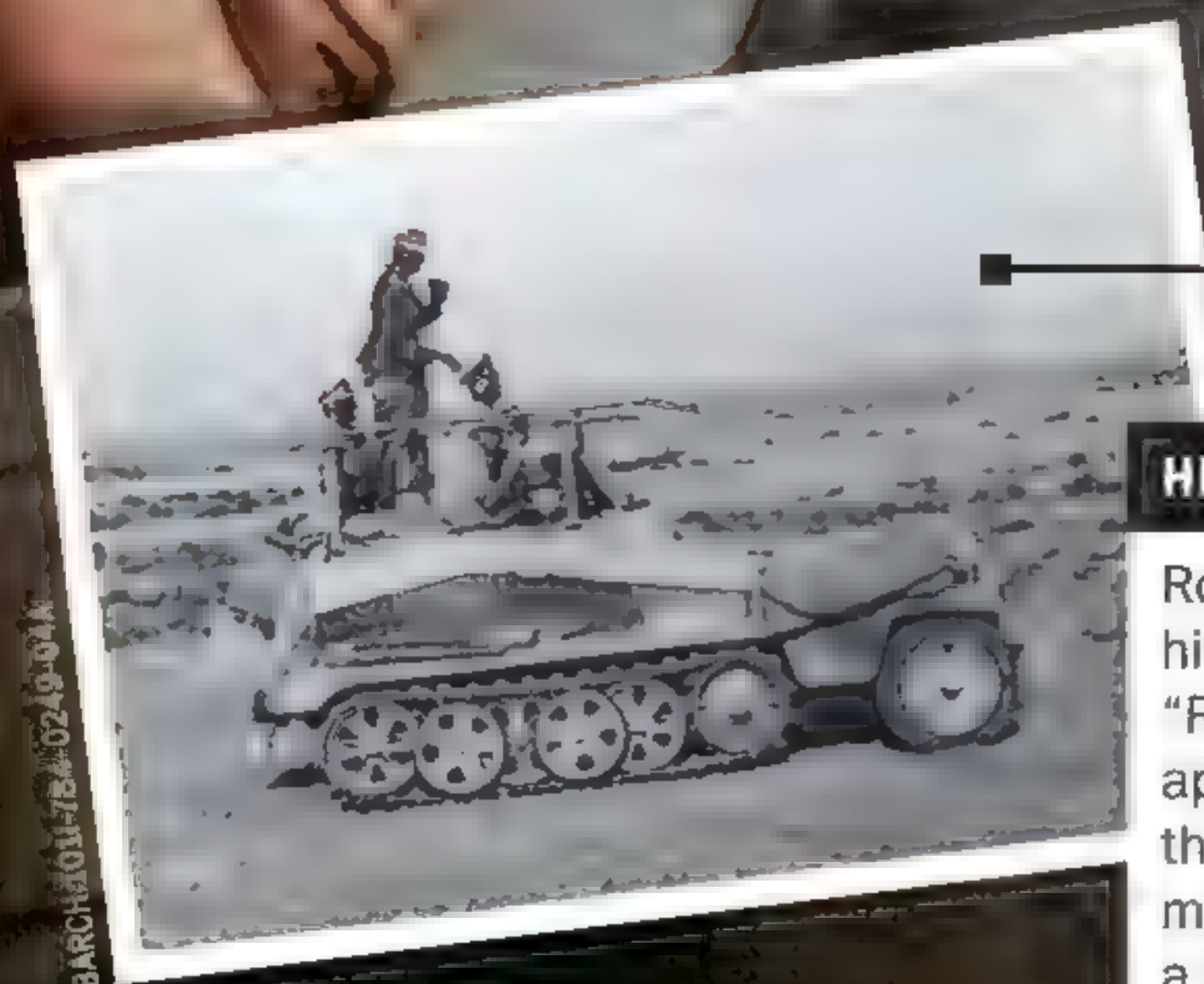
The camera loved Rommel

The Desert Fox is remembered for his tactical abilities that won him a place among the great warlords of military history. However, people close to him also knew him as a touchy, self-absorbed man who was protective of

his reputation. He didn't mind featuring in German propaganda, and Rommel liked to pose for photographers. Critical fellow officers later claimed that he was only at his best when things were going well and everything was succeeding.

GOGGLES ALWAYS ON HIS HAT

In most photos, Rommel wears goggles on his cap. They protected his eyes from desert sand, and at the same time looked good in pictures. The goggles became British booty. Rommel gave them to an enemy general who was captured by German soldiers in 1941.



HIS VEHICLE WAS ESSENTIAL

Rommel loved being out among his troops. The soldiers shouted "Rommel is leading" when he appeared among his units on the front line. His preferred means of transportation was a half-track vehicle with radio equipment, so that he could stay in contact with his units.

overall command, Rommel controlled most of Italy's mobile units. Given that it was only mobile troops that had any combat value in the desert, this meant that Rommel was really in command.

“Rommel was a military phenomenon that can occur only at rare intervals”

GENERAL ARCHIBALD WAVELL

Using his German Afrika Korps and the Italian support troops, Rommel soon took the offensive, despite having received orders to the contrary.

“*Sturm, schwung, wucht*” was his fighting motto, which was repeated again and again by the German officers – “attack, momentum, force”.

Rommel demonstrated the practical meaning of the words every time

the British stopped and formed a line of defence. Instead of making a frontal attack, Rommel found a way to strike its flank. His ability to read the landscape was unsurpassed, and time and again the British were beaten by an opponent who fought at a much faster pace than themselves.

Only when Rommel's supply lines became too long and his vehicles ran out of fuel did he stop his offensive. A stalemate ensued until German stores were replenished. Then Rommel moved forward again, taking the city of Tobruk in a dramatic battle and penetrating all the way to El Alamein, just 100 kilometres from the large Egyptian port city of Alexandria.

Legends about the Desert Fox began to circulate, and the German general started to gain an almost mythical status among his followers.

The German and Italian soldiers noticed how their general was always in the thick of the action on the front line. He lived, sweated, slept and ate like his men. Several times, while driving close to the front in his

command car, he met British patrols and only escaped by pure luck. Such courage won the respect of his troops.

Rommel called the soldiers his “Africans”, and they affectionately referred to him as Erwin. They shared a sense of being far from home and almost forgotten by the rest of the German Army.

The men knew full well that North Africa was not the priority when it came to distributing tanks, petrol and new supplies between the many fronts of Nazi Germany. But they endured the privations, because they had the invincible Erwin.

“Always there is this strange magic strength that this soldier radiates to his troops, right down to the last rifleman,” wrote war correspondent Baron von Eisebeck about Rommel's effect on combat morale.

Newspaper hero

In one of the peculiarities of World War II, the adulation Rommel enjoyed didn't come just from the front line Axis troops. When British soldiers sat in their foxholes, they talked about the German panzer general with a mixture of fear and admiration. The men didn't talk of fighting the Germans or the Italians – they were fighting the Desert Fox, who was smarter, wiser and faster than the British generals. A new phrase was even coined in the general's

honour: British soldiers began to use the term “doing a Rommel” to describe anyone who displayed unusual cunning.

Stories of the German officer's abilities spread from North Africa to Europe and North America. In Germany, propaganda started to promote Rommel, and reports of his exploits were often part of the weekly newsreels. Admiration also crept into the Allied media.

A series of defeats in June 1942 led to the *New York Times*' headline “Rommel lectures the British on tactics”, while George Patton, still a relatively unknown US

Erwin Rommel's rapid advance in an exotic land made for good propaganda in Germany.

GETTY IMAGES



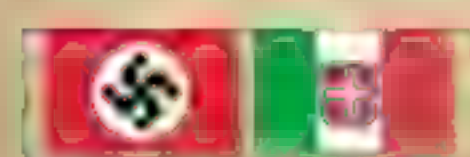
DESERT FOX TRICKS: ATTACK BEATS DEFENCE

Turning the tables

In 1941, the British tried to break through Rommel's defences, but once again, the Desert Fox responded with an offensive of his own.

Operation Battleaxe was the British attempt to beat Rommel at his own game. The front in North Africa hadn't moved for a few months when British armoured columns advanced against German and Italian positions in June 1941. The tanks were supposed to break through Rommel's line and penetrate deep into the enemy's hinterland.

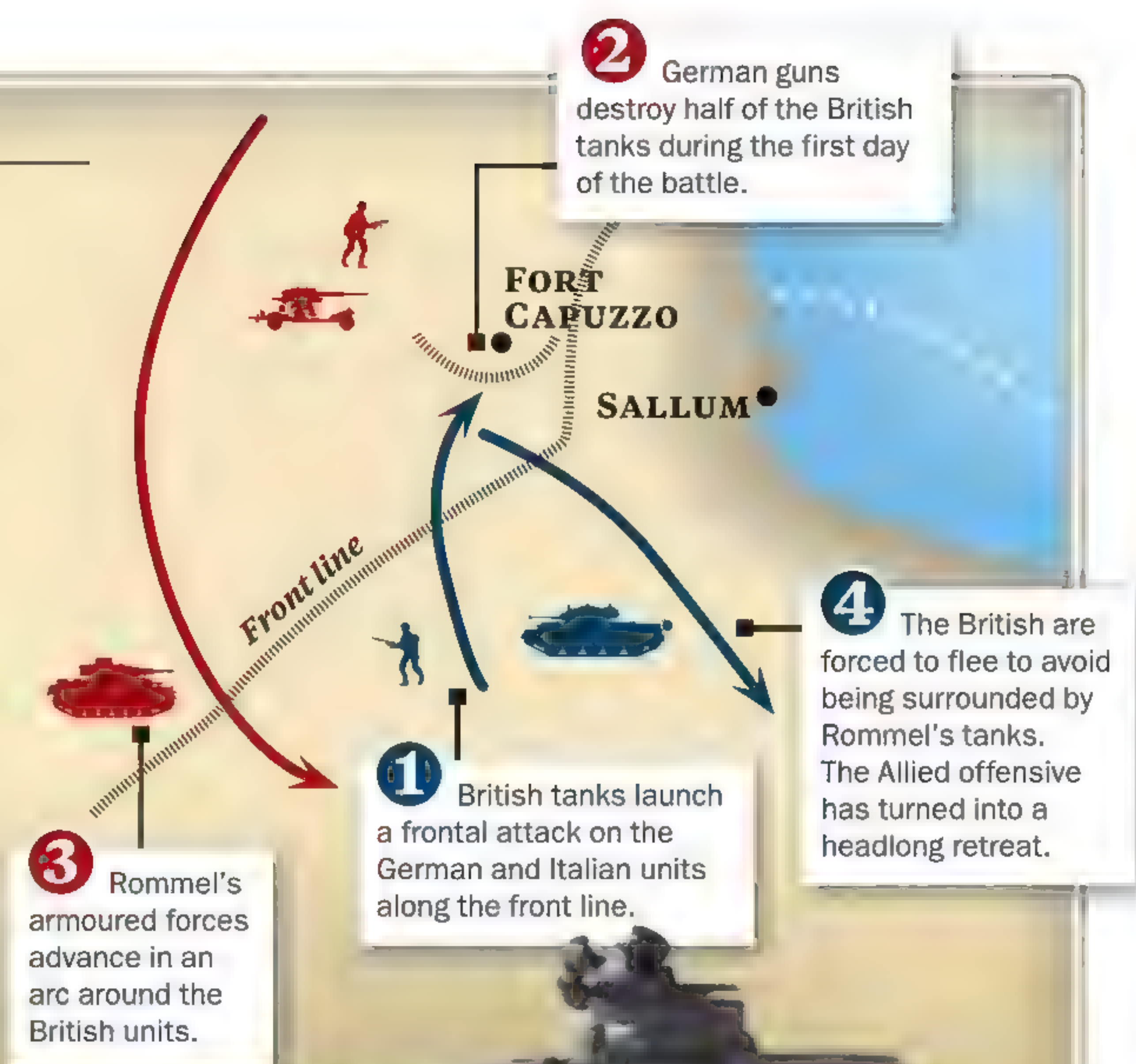
Rommel's defence consisted of fortified positions with artillery and mines. These were designed to delay the attackers, but the key element was the tank reserve that Rommel intended to launch at his enemy to steal the initiative and force them back on the defensive. Experience had taught him that an army on the run has only a fraction of its normal strength.



Rommel
197 tanks



British
190 tanks



Tanks were the decisive weapon in the desert landscape of North Africa, but they also consumed a lot of petrol. Rommel never had enough fuel.

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

tank general, stated "I want to fight with the Champ," referring to Rommel. Interest in the German became so intense that in 1943, US General Dwight Eisenhower – the man who later led the Allied efforts against Nazi Germany – grudgingly told reporters that Rommel was "a great general" but "not a superman". The words were a reaction to another article in the *New York Times*, which hailed Rommel as "The Man We Have to Beat". Even Churchill chipped in, saying: "We have a very daring and skilful opponent against us ... a great general."

In July 1942, Rommel mania reached such heights that British General Claude Auchinleck, then commander of the Eighth Army – the British Army in North Africa – issued an order to dispel

the mythos surrounding Rommel. "He is by no means a superman," Auchinleck said, adding that it was "highly undesirable that our men should credit him with supernatural powers. I wish you to dispel ... the idea that Rommel represents something more than an ordinary German general ... We must refer to 'the Germans' or 'the Axis powers' or 'the enemy' and not always keep harping on Rommel".

Rommel also complimented the British – the private soldiers, at least: "Gentlemen, you have fought like lions," he told captured British POWs, "and been led by donkeys."

Hope of victory was extinguished

But while Rommel was fêted, feared and inundated with love letters from

German women, he was pessimistic about the course the war was taking. By late summer 1942, his advance had stalled at El Alamein, and a desperate attempt to break through had failed. He knew reinforcements and new US weapons made the enemy stronger every day and that a British offensive was on the cards. Meanwhile, stretched supply lines meant his own army received only a fraction of what it needed.

Rommel's health was also suffering. Africa's harsh climate and the inhuman stress of leading from the front had given the formerly fit and tanned field marshal a list of ailments: chronic gastroenteritis, nasal diphtheria, circulatory disorders and hypotension.

In an attempt to recover, he returned to Germany for treatment. While >>>

there, he met with Hitler and realised, for the first time, that the dictator had a completely unrealistic picture of the situation at the front line.

Up until then, the two men had enjoyed a close relationship. Hitler distrusted many of his aristocratic senior commanders, but as the son of a teacher, Rommel was different, and the

Führer's sympathy helped launch the general's career.

For his part, Rommel admired the way Hitler had made Germany powerful again after the crushing defeat of World War I. Like others, he was also swayed by the Führer's powers of persuasion. But when they met in autumn 1942, Rommel's image of

Hitler began to crack. The Führer refused to face reality. Instead, he promised Rommel that he would soon be back on the offensive with plenty of the new Tiger tanks, rocket launchers and supplies. But Rommel had heard it all before, yet nothing ever changed.

The general explained that his tanks were being blown to pieces now by US planes with 40-mm guns. The Luftwaffe chief, Hermann Göring, who was also at the meeting, scoffed at the claim: "That's completely impossible. The Americans only know how to make razor blades."

"We could do with some of those razor blades," Rommel replied, laying the casing of an US-made 40-mm shell on the table.

The evidence didn't help. The German Army had launched a major offensive against Stalingrad on the Eastern Front, and the attack required all of Germany's military resources.

Offensive genius on the back foot

By the time Rommel returned to Africa, the British were in the process of tearing his Afrika Korps to pieces. The Eighth Army had a new commander – General Bernard Montgomery – who was attacking with far superior forces. He had 220,000 men and 1,100 tanks against Rommel's 560 tanks and 115,000 men.

The Battle of El Alamein inevitably turned into a German-Italian defeat, and Rommel's force was eventually pushed all the way back to Tunisia. In May 1943, the remnants of his army surrendered. Rommel himself avoided being captured, because Hitler had called him home, but the general never forgave the Führer for not allowing his Afrika Korps to be rescued in time.

In November 1943, the Desert Fox was given responsibility for the Atlantic Wall, the coastal defence that ran from North Cape in Norway to the Spanish border. It was established to protect occupied Europe from invasion, but "Fortress Europe" turned out to be another of Hitler's fantasies. The beaches were only weakly fortified, and Rommel began a race against time to lay mines and build fortifications before

DESERT FOX TRICKS: SAVE THE TANKS FOR LATER

Fox's biggest victory

Guns did the hard work at the Battle of Gazala in 1942. Rommel saved his tanks for just the right moment.

The Battle of Gazala in May-June 1942 was Rommel's greatest victory, and saw him outsmart a stronger British Army. The triumph demonstrated his ability to use his weapons to their greatest effect.

The Desert Fox avoided fighting with his tanks in order to preserve his remaining machines. When the British attacked, he preferred to leave it to well-placed guns to stop them, while Rommel's own armoured forces drove around to catch them in a large pincer manoeuvre. The tactic worked because he usually thought further ahead than his opponents.



Rommel

90,000 men
560 tanks



British

110,000 men
840 tanks



Germany's dreaded 88-mm gun could pierce even the thickest British armour.

ULLSTE N/POLFO



Rommel met regularly with Hitler, but as time went on, he became increasingly critical of the Nazi leader. His criticism contributed to his death in the autumn of 1944.

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

The Nazis believed Rommel was part of the assassination plot against Hitler. He was forced to commit suicide, but it was claimed officially that he died of his wounds.

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

it was too late. Again, Hitler promised reinforcements and supplies, but they never arrived.

The Atlantic Wall couldn't hold the Allies when they landed in Normandy in June 1944. They succeeded in temporarily containing the invaders in a strip of land along the coast, but Rommel knew that the Allies' superiority was too great. Sooner or later, the enemy would break through. He was one of the few German officers who had the courage to confront Hitler.

When the two met, the Führer raved about new miracle weapons, but Rommel had had enough and demanded to know if Hitler actually believed the war could still be won.

Hitler became furious. Hammering his fist on the table, he yelled that Rommel should stick to military matters and leave political affairs to him. Rommel angrily replied:

"History demands of me that I should deal first with our overall

situation!" Hitler's rage reached new heights and Rommel was thrown out of the meeting.

Assassination cost Rommel dear

Back at the front, the Desert Fox began clandestine talks about Germany's future. He told one of his closest colleagues that if Hitler didn't admit that he had lost, then he was "going to open up the western front", adding "there's only one thing that matters now: the British and Americans must get to Berlin before the Russians do!".

“He was a splendid military gambler”

PRIME MINISTER WINSTON CHURCHILL

However, he never enacted his plan. On 17th July 1944, his staff car was attacked by two British Spitfires. His driver tried to zigzag but was hit by bullets and the car smashed head-on

into a tree. Rommel was thrown through the windshield and suffered a fractured skull, but he survived.

Three days later, while Rommel was fighting for his life in hospital, German officers involved in a conspiracy detonated a bomb at a briefing attended by Hitler. The assassination attempt failed, but in the months that followed, the Nazis carried out a brutal purge of the army.


In all, 4,980 officers and senior advisors were executed. The majority had nothing to do with the assassination, but the Nazis used the opportunity to crack down hard on sceptics. One of them was Rommel, who was on sick leave at home when he was visited in October 1944.

"In a quarter of an hour I shall be dead," Rommel told his wife when officers brought poison for his suicide.

Two days later, a grieving Lucia Rommel received a personal letter from Hitler. It read:

"Accept my sincerest sympathy for the heavy loss you have suffered with the death of your husband. The name of Field Marshal Rommel will be for ever linked with the heroic battles in North Africa. Adolf Hitler"

The Desert Fox was dead.



Stalin sacrificed 1.5 million
men in the war's worst battle:

Massacre at Rzhev

In 1942, the Nazis entrenched themselves near the city of Rzhev, only 200 kilometres from Moscow. The threat of a fresh attack on the capital prompted Stalin to order his exhausted army into a suicidal offensive. The Germans' defence turned out to be so strong that, after a few months, the Soviets began calling the assault the "Rzhev meat grinder".

“After me! Forward! Cha-a-a-rge!” Boris Gorbachevsky suddenly felt completely alone in the world. Somewhere, a few hundred metres ahead, “Hitler’s beasts” lay in their trenches, where they’d been holed up for months, with the Red Army unable to push them back. The young infantryman knew what he had to do, but he was rooted to the spot. A wave of nausea flooded over him as he gripped his rifle tightly.

That August morning in 1942, Gorbachevsky was in a village southwest of Rzhev, near Moscow, his division decimated. Soviet tanks continued to roll out from the edge of the forest behind him, and the sound of the first shell ripped through the morning silence. The battle – or “meat grinder”, as the Red Army soldiers called it – was underway. Again.

“Forward! Forward!” roared a commander. Feeling a trickle of sweat under his helmet, Gorbachevsky forced himself to stand up. Row after row of Red Army soldiers rushed forward, wildly roaring the Soviet battle cry:

“Ura-a! Ura-a!” They were halfway out into the open when the Germans opened fire: geysers of earth shot up, and the dead and the living were thrown into the air. The wounded screamed for help. In the middle of it all, Gorbachevsky heard a terrifying howling noise. A bomber, with its siren wailing, suddenly dived and dropped its load. Deafening explosions forced the air from Gorbachevsky’s lungs. Confused, he searched the skies in vain for the Soviet planes that should have been counter-attacking.

One of the surviving officers urged the troops forward again with a roar, and once more Gorbachevsky headed straight towards the German onslaught. Some of his comrades vomited while running. Others cried. There were few men left in Gorbachevsky’s group when he fell to the ground himself. He’d been hit by shrapnel.

Despite the huge Soviet losses, it didn’t surprise Gorbachevsky to see a new wave of soldiers surging forward behind him. The human sacrifice continued all day, and the deaths among the exhausted, starving Red Army »»

soldiers broke all records. But Gorbachevsky understood Stalin's order: the German front line near Moscow had to be destroyed, whatever it took – even if it cost Gorbachevsky his life.

Stalin's lightning offensive

Several months before Gorbachevsky was hit by shrapnel, Soviet dictator

Joseph Stalin had called together the Red Army's high command, the Stavka. He was still feeling buoyant after the victory in Moscow in 1941, but one thing tormented him: only 200 kilometres from the capital, the Germans had entrenched themselves in a pocket of approximately 200 square kilometres around the city of Rzhev. The area, according to Stalin,

was a pistol pointed at the heart of the Soviet Union.

"The Germans are in disarray as a result of their defeat," he told his top generals and advisers.

According to the dictator, winter was the best time to launch an offensive. General Zhukov, the hero of the victory at Moscow, cautiously objected, saying that their lack of ammunition, fuel and

Soviet amateurs fought to the death

The infantry was the most vulnerable group in the Red Army. The soldiers there had minimal training and were led by inexperienced officers. Nor did the Red Army boost its units with reserves as they dwindled. The units fought until everyone was dead or the few survivors transferred to new units.

HELMET

Only the luckiest soldiers got an American-style helmet. The rest had to settle for a cap.

RIFLE

The standard weapon was the reliable Mosin-Nagant 91/30 with a five-shot magazine.

SOVIET TANKS



SOVIET SOLDIERS



SOVIET GUNS



SHOES

Good boots were in short supply. The privates often stole them from dead German soldiers.

Germans ran out of soldiers and guns

The Wehrmacht was Europe's most advanced army, but the Germans – unlike the Red Army – didn't have an unlimited number of soldiers to sacrifice. This meant that, as the war progressed, the army became weaker and weaker and lost its strength for offensive operations.

RIFLE

The Germans were equipped with a Karabiner 98k rifle. It had a range of 500 metres.

WINTER UNIFORM

At the beginning of the war, the Germans didn't wear winter uniforms. That changed at Rzhev.

GERMAN TANKS



GERMAN SOLDIERS



GERMAN GUNS



WINTER BOOTS

The Germans came to Russia in summer footwear. By Rzhev, they'd got good winter boots.

equipment was a serious problem. The Red Army had been weakened, and the victory had cost a lot of lives. But Stalin wouldn't listen: "Our task is ... to give the Germans no time to draw breath," the dictator admonished.

Stalin wanted a lightning offensive: the German pocket was to be attacked simultaneously from two sides, the towns in the area were to be recaptured on the way, and the Wehrmacht's reserves were to be depleted. The German army had a total of 625,000 men, and the Soviets would pitch 688,000 against them.

On 10th January 1942, 45-year-old General Efremov launched an attack on Rzhev from the south-east. At the same time, the 29th Army struck from the north: the Germans' fist-shaped salient had to be cut off at the wrist.

Efremov managed to break through the German front line and drive a 110-kilometre wedge towards the town of Vyazma, south-west of Rzhev. His troops were approaching Vyazma when the worst possible news reached the general. The Germans had attacked his rear troops and cut him off from the rest of the Red Army. Efremov's men were surrounded behind enemy lines and left to fend for themselves in the bitter Soviet winter.

Many years after the war, Soviet soldier Yevgeny Nizovtsev described how the winter had been mercilessly harsh, with snow so deep that it was

almost impossible to walk, and constant snowstorms. All the while, the Red Army's troops had to continue fighting, even though they were surrounded and constantly fired upon.

***"Our task is
to give the
Germans no
time to draw
breath"***

JOSEPH STALIN

A standard daily ration now had to last four days, and there weren't enough medical supplies to treat the wounded. The Cavalry's horses died in the freezing temperatures, which were as low as minus 30 degrees Celsius, and the soldiers sawed up the frozen carcasses in order to cook the meat.

On top of the incredible suffering, their ammunition had almost run out, too. Efremov contacted the General Staff and asked if they could retreat, but General Zhukov rejected the request. According to Zhukov, Efremov had caused the problem himself – he should have defended his rearguard.

The surrounded Efremov was bombed constantly from the air. The

29th Army, which was supposed to cut the Germans off from the north, received the same treatment. Even its field hospital was wiped out by the Luftwaffe, whose Stuka bombers spread terror among the Red Army.

Soldier Vladimir Karpov later recalled how the sound of the aircraft's sirens drove the Soviet troops crazy; as soon as they started, he was paralysed by anxiety and even heard them in his dreams, describing the noise as the sound of death.

Germany dominated the air, and by the end of January, the 29th Army had lost 80,000 men and had to withdraw.

All the survivors of the 29th Army were frostbitten and wounded, noted one army nurse: "There was not a single healthy one among them."

Soviet was German role model

Meanwhile, the situation got worse and worse for Efremov, whose besieged army was dying. The General Staff, however, was of no help, and each call to Zhukov received the same reply.

"Search for food locally ... search for shells also in place," he ordered. The starving soldiers ate bark, snow and roots while being fired upon constantly.

Later, soldier Yevgeny Nizovtsev recalled how they'd put small stones in their mouths to suck on to try to forget the hunger, while some tried to eat soil.

It wasn't until April that Zhukov gave permission to withdraw. But by >>>

***For 14 months, Soviet forces fought in vain
against the Germans' superior might.***

GETTY IMAGES



then it was too late. Efremov's remaining men were exhausted and could no longer march the 150 km back. Surrounded by Germans, Efremov eventually shot himself rather than suffer the shame of surrender.

The Germans honoured the dead Soviet general with a hero's burial ("Fight for Germany as this man did for his country," General Walter Model

urged his men), but Zhukov didn't spend any time mourning the loss of a general. Together with Stalin, he prepared the next stage of the offensive, which by then had cost 300,000 men.

The 11th Cavalry Corps had been surrounded since February and paratroopers were going to be sent in to help. However, poor organisation weakened the plan – during the month of May, only 1,663 men arrived. Again

and again, the corps asked for more help. It never came, and the entire 11th Cavalry Corps of 16,000 men made a chaotic attempt to break out. Along the route, wrecked vehicles, dead horses and human bodies soon piled up.

"The groans of the wounded [were] ... heartrending," noted survivor Vladimir Poliakov.

Soviet soldiers were sacrificed

Meanwhile, German officers received a directive from Berlin: the Führer

Red Army ran into a German deathtrap

The Germans' front line at Rzhev was organised as one powerful bulwark. All strategically important points were turned into bastions, connected by powerful lines of defence.

The first and second lines consisted of foxholes connected by trenches.

The Germans had rolled out barbed wire ahead of the front line.

The artillery was located two to five kilometres behind the first and second lines.

A total of 1.5 million Soviet soldiers lost their lives in the deathtrap at Rzhev.

HISTORIE/CLAUS LUNAU

demanded that the Rzhev salient be kept at all costs. Therefore, on 2nd June 1942, the Germans launched Operation Seydlitz, which was to clear the pocket of Soviet troops. Via intercepted radio messages and reports from prisoners and defectors, the Germans knew that the forests were full of Soviet troops who had been left behind.

The Wehrmacht sent special forces of defectors and Russian-speaking soldiers into the forests, where they spread false information among the starving and

confused Soviets, who again and again found themselves surrounded.

On 12th July, Operation Seydlitz ended: 30,000 Soviet soldiers had been captured and 187,700 killed.

"Now ... to gather strength and create a continuous line of defence again," said General Horst Grossmann of the German 6th Infantry Division.

But if the Germans thought they could rest, they were wrong. Stalin cynically planned to deplete the Nazi forces at Rzhev, because the Red Army

had discovered that Germany was preparing an attack on Stalingrad.

By tying up as many German troops as possible in the Rzhev outpost, Stalin wanted to ensure that the Nazis would be unable to give Stalingrad their full attention. The Stavka's next major campaign was therefore both an attack and a diversionary manoeuvre.

However, the Red Army's summer campaign in 1942 got off to a bad start. It rained incessantly for 10 days, turning the terrain into rivers of

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The Red Army deployed so-called blocking troops that shot any soldiers who dared to retreat.

The Germans hid nasty surprises on the ground, such as mines connected by barbed wire. If the wire was touched, the mines exploded.

1 THE SOVIETS ATTACK

The Germans react quickly when the Red Army's offensive begins on 10th January 1942. In a few days, the Wehrmacht surrounds the enemy.

2 SOLDIERS FALL INTO AMBUSH

On 24 May 1942, paratroopers drop behind German lines to surround the Nazi troops. However, the Germans again react quickly and surround the invaders.

mud. When Boris Gorbachevsky arrived at the front in July and crawled into a trench, it was already half flooded.

The soldiers wore sodden clothes day and night. And along with severe levels of hunger, fever and pneumonia caused the Red Army to grow weaker than ever. The operation continued, however, and on the evening of 29th July, the Stavka issued a radio warning to the locals, who frantically tried to evacuate the area. It was obvious to the Germans what lay in store.

On the day of the attack, most of the Red Army's tank units were stuck in the mud, and the infantry were left to face the enemy's fire alone.

One German general noted in his records that he couldn't understand the way the Soviets used their soldiers, sending them out into the battlefield like cows to be slaughtered.

Germans fought three battles

At a village south-west of Rzhev, Gorbachevsky's shrapnel injury gave him a way out of the meat grinder. In the field hospital, he felt the frustrations of the other wounded soldiers – no one understood why the dead weren't being buried, or why there were no planes to protect them. But no one dared mention it to the officers for fear of reprisals.

Every day, soldiers who had shot themselves in the hand or foot to escape the battlefield flocked to the hospital, to the frustration of the medical staff. Gorbachevsky lay in a tent packed with the wounded. He tried to find out how

the battle he'd been in had ended, and why capturing the village was so important, but no one had an answer.

What he did learn was that Stalin had given an order that would turn the soldiers' nightmare at Rzhev into absolute hell. Order no. 227 became known as "Not a step back".

"To retreat further means to destroy ourselves and, along with that, to destroy our Motherland," were the words that caused Gorbachevsky to blanch. The order meant that the Soviet generals had to deploy blocking troops; anyone who tried to retreat would be shot by his own army. And in the worst battles at Rzhev, penal battalions were thrown at the enemy; prisoners of war, criminals and deserters could earn their freedom if they survived the battlefield. No one did.

But Stalin's human sacrifices bore fruit. Slowly, the Red Army began to advance, and – after another 300,000 mortalities – were only six kilometres from Rzhev at the end of August.

The Germans were struggling. Stalin's suicidal tactics had also led to huge German losses. Meanwhile, Nazi troops were advancing on Stalingrad. Combined with the siege of Leningrad and the Battle of Rzhev, the Germans were now fighting three major battles on the Eastern Front at once. Their resources were stretched to the extreme.

Basic equipment was lacking

While Gorbachevsky's wounds healed, the Red Army marched to within a few

kilometres of Rzhev. Every village on the way was held in an iron grip by the Germans, and the Soviets sacrificed thousands of soldiers to take just one. The 30th Army continuously attacked the same small village from the same side for 20 days – until a new officer took command, attacked from the other side, and took the village in two hours. Stalin's purges among his officers in the 1930s meant that men such as school teachers, whose only experience was commanding students, were now considered qualified to be officers.

In October, Gorbachevsky was finally ready to fight again. He was sent to a regiment where he was given the rank of lieutenant. His new boss welcomed him – drunk: "If you have to, resist to the last man, and don't count on any help, as there is no one left to fight." Gorbachevsky's small division numbered only 20 men and lacked basic equipment. At night, they had to crawl out into the woods and pull the boots off dead Germans. They called the German footwear "God's gifts".

The days got shorter and colder, and Gorbachevsky's division slept in damp foxholes in collapsed trenches. Only a few hundred metres away, the Germans were living in heated bunkers complete with electricity. At 06.00 they drank coffee and ate breakfast, then proceeded to taunt the Soviets over their loudspeakers: "Let's fight!"

In November, Gorbachevsky's division arrived at the bank of the Volga, where they moved into the

**German machine-gunners
were ready at every
important strategic location.**

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX



Retreat was a tactical masterpiece

Hitler wasn't usually in favour of retreats – even if they provided a tactical advantage. After the defeat at Stalingrad, however, he had to compromise and save the troops at Rzhev.



The Germans abandoned the area near Rzhev on 1st March 1943, because they wanted to save resources by shortening their front. Earlier, in February, they'd prepared such a comprehensive withdrawal that Operation Büffel was later put on the curriculum of German military academies. The Germans gained enough time for four retreats by laying mines on all the roads and blowing up bridges, including a railway bridge near Rzhev. Hitler wanted to hear it being destroyed, so his men rolled out kilometres of telephone cable so that the Führer could hear the explosion in Berlin.

Germans' abandoned trenches. "Hitler's beasts" had retreated to the opposite shore, from where they tried to entice the Soviets every day via their loudspeakers: "Come over to our side! We will hold our fire until 6 o'clock in the morning. We'll be having breakfast at 06.30." The Germans repeated the message several times a day, and sometimes used a Soviet soldier who'd defected to tempt them: "They're giving us French chocolate, Dutch cheese and Danish ham to eat."

The Red Army lacked everything from tobacco to helmets. Yet Stalin's starving army continued to advance, threatened by its own blocking troops.

But Gorbachevsky's unit couldn't cross the frozen Volga, as the Germans shot them down on the ice. When the Red Army finally reached Rzhev's city limits, Gorbachevsky had to celebrate the last day of 1942 on the Volga.

Germans tricked Red Army

The Red Army now shelled Rzhev from morning to night. The fighting went

back and forth in the city streets, and each captured house cost hundreds of Soviet lives.

"After four weeks, it is now impossible to recognise a single building ... A cratered landscape has arisen in place of [Rzhev]," noted General Grossman.

Despair descended upon the Soviet soldiers. The streets were packed with corpses and the number of wounded was catastrophic. The situation

seemed impossible. Then the news of the German defeat at Stalingrad reached them – and hope washed over the Red Army like a tidal wave.

A triumphant cry spread like wildfire among the soldiers. The broken men were comforted by the renewed promise of victory. Now the Germans were to be dealt a death blow.

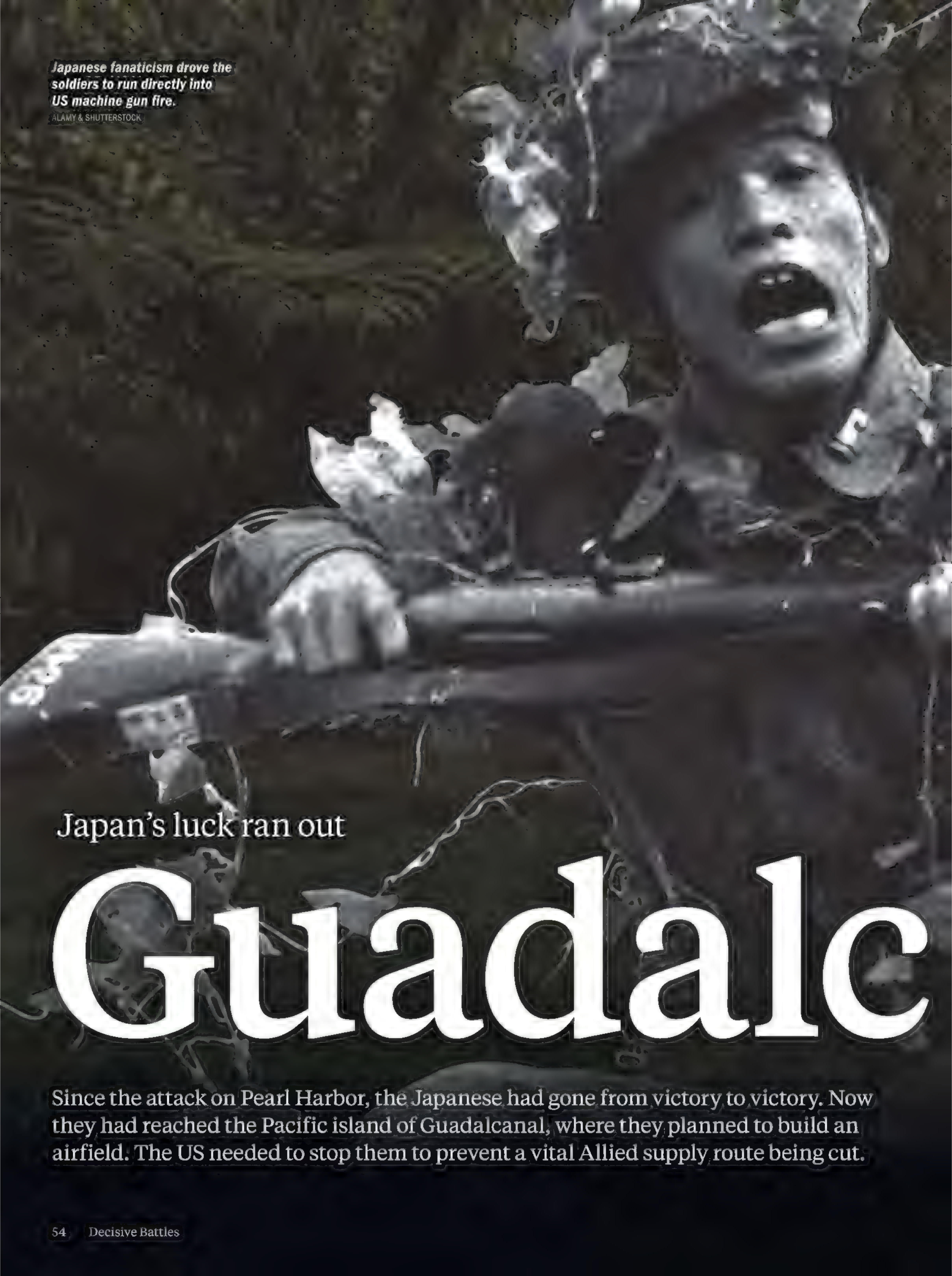
On the other side of the front, though, it was quiet. The Germans were preparing for a controlled withdrawal. Under cover of night, the Wehrmacht built 800 km of road, established new lines of defence 200 km to the west, and emptied the Rzhev salient of supplies and food. They mined the remaining buildings, blew up railway lines and conscripted 60,000 Soviet citizens as auxiliary troops. On 1st March, the Germans withdrew, and carried out a special order for Hitler on the way: the Führer wanted to hear the bridge over the Volga being blown up when his troops left Rzhev. So, his men rolled out kilometres of telephone wire and the explosion was heard in Berlin.

Stalin ordered the pursuit of the fleeing enemy. The Soviet troops marched on, and at the sight of the Germans' empty trenches outside Rzhev, they became intoxicated with victory: "Fritz has skedaddled!" On 3rd March, the Red Army finally entered Rzhev's bombed-out streets. Of the city's 5,000 houses, only 200 remained.

On 4th March 1943, the Soviet Information Bureau issued a statement: "Our troops have occupied Rzhev." All the mistakes had been forgotten, not least the 1.5 million Soviet soldiers who fell in the Battle of Rzhev.

The fighting in Rzhev was so fierce that almost the entire city was razed to the ground.

PHOTO: J. JACKSON/ALAMY



Japanese fanaticism drove the soldiers to run directly into US machine gun fire.

ALAMY & SHUTTERSTOCK

Japan's luck ran out

Guadalcanal

Since the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had gone from victory to victory. Now they had reached the Pacific island of Guadalcanal, where they planned to build an airfield. The US needed to stop them to prevent a vital Allied supply route being cut.

Machine guns snarled and rifles split the air with sharp cracks. Both became muffled when artillery shells exploded. Shouts joined the cacophony. Hoarse US marines called for more ammo, and the Japanese roared their defiant war cry: "Banzai!"

The slope was already thick with Japanese corpses, yet they continued to attack up the ridge. Small khaki-clad figures advanced with fanatical courage, and despite the volleys that felled their comrades, they continued on without hesitation. The US marines manning the positions on the ridge suddenly lost their nerve. Traumatized, they staggered away from the horror. But no one could be excused on this September night in 1942: defeat would mean the annihilation of the US force on Guadalcanal.

Colonel Edson pushed the men back. "The only thing those Japs have got that you don't have is guts!" he roared. "Now get the hell over there and get to firing!"

The marines took up their posts once more to resume the slaughter. Eventually there were no more Japanese in front of them. Only the dead and wounded.

The Japanese tried again, but they couldn't take the ridge, which was just a thousand metres from the Henderson Field US airbase. This rudimentary landing strip was the key to Guadalcanal and thus to the Solomon Islands and dominion over the South West Pacific.

On the generals' maps, the island was just a small spot of colour, but it was there that US soldiers fought a running battle against the Japanese for six desperate months.

King wanted his own battlefield

In the first phase of World War II, the Japanese had gone from victory to victory. There was a sense of invincibility in the Imperial Navy HQ when, in April 1942, the admirals decided to occupy the Solomon Islands. They started from the north and continued from island to island towards Guadalcanal, where they planned to build an airfield. The advance would serve to cut the sea route between Australia and the US West Coast, thereby denying the Americans access to the raw materials of East Asia.

In Washington, concern spread as word reached them of Japan's arrival >>>

anal

in Guadalcanal. But for the US Navy commander, Ernest King, the concern was mixed with satisfaction.

King had been disconcerted by Roosevelt and Churchill's recent agreement to crush Nazi Germany before settling their score with Japan. The strategy doomed the US fleet to play a supporting role for years to come. The admiral was therefore keen to find a battlefield that needed the US Navy's attack force and transport capacity.

In King's eyes, the Solomon Islands provided the perfect opportunity to crack the Allied leaders' "Germany first" strategy. There was no need to exaggerate the serious consequences of failing to stop the Japanese operation. The army chief of staff had no choice but to bow to the inevitable, but he refused to contribute soldiers. The president gave his blessing, but insisted that the operation had to be small and require minimal resources.

The navy improvised

King didn't yet know where in the Solomon Islands he would strike, but when the battle came, it would involve the 1st Marine Division, which was his only reserve in spring 1942. The force had served as a transit camp for other US units up until that point and could barely be described as combat ready.

The division's general, Alexander Vandegrift, was therefore astonished when he was ordered to sail from the

United States to New Zealand with his entire division.

Then, having just arrived, Vandegrift was ordered to ready his marines to capture Tulagi in the Solomon Islands on 1st August. The general had almost

“The coastwatchers saved Guadalcanal, and Guadalcanal saved the South Pacific”

WILLIAM HALSEY,
US FLEET ADMIRAL

no time to prepare the troops, gather intelligence on enemy forces and study the landscape around his operational targets. With feverish haste, he and the Pacific Fleet COs started to improvise while pleading with King for more time. The admiral gave them just six extra days. On 7th August, a rapidly scraped-together fleet lay off Tulagi and its larger island neighbour, Guadalcanal, which in the interim, had also been designated a target.

The marines climbed into their landing craft, which were arranged in formation, and then set course for the

coast. The first of many US coastal invasions had begun.

The Japanese on the small island of Tulagi radioed for reinforcements, but after a bloody day, they were defeated to the last man. On Guadalcanal, the marines encountered no resistance, and the Americans flooded ashore.

“Unusually successful,” Vandegrift noted in his report, writing that everything “proceeded with ease and precision, as if it were a standard exercise in peacetime”.

11,000 were left in the jungle

After fighting their way through six kilometres of jungle, Vandegrift's men finally arrived at the Japanese camp on Guadalcanal. It was deserted. The Japanese force, most of whom were forced labourers, had taken refuge up the coast, leaving behind tonnes of supplies. The Americans would soon benefit greatly from the rice and excavators they found, for disaster lurked just off the coast of Guadalcanal.

The island was guarded by two US aircraft carriers, whose planes repulsed several Japanese air strikes in the first day and a half. The fighting, however, had cost 21 out of the original 99 fighters on board, which alarmed the ships' admiral, who considered his vessels more important than the outcome of the Solomon Islands operation. Therefore, on 8th August, he withdrew his two floating airbases, leaving only a small escort of warships to defend the invasion fleet, which had by then only unloaded a fraction of its cargo of supplies.

That same night, the Japanese Navy struck. A squadron arrived under the cover of darkness, sank four US and Australian cruisers, then sailed away. The naval battle off Savo Island was a

The Allies used tanks in the jungle for the first time when the M3 Stuart was deployed on Guadalcanal.

DON MILLSAP



disaster. The defeat had deprived the transport ships of their only protection, and so the following morning, they hauled anchor and left Guadalcanal with their cargo holds still virtually full. General Vandegrift and his 11,000 men were left behind without enough field rations, medicine or barbed wire.

Admiral King's desire to land troops on the Solomon Islands had been fulfilled. But no one had made plans for how to survive in the harsh tropical climate or defend themselves when the Japanese decided to make a fight of it.

The Americans put all their efforts into completing the runway and surrounding it with a ring of defensive positions. By 20th August, the work had progressed sufficiently to allow Guadalcanal to host its own air force in the form of 31 fighters and bombers.

"Now let the bastards come!" one American soldier crowed. A few hours later, the Japanese did just that.

Japan responded

Japan's military leaders were initially unconcerned by the situation on Guadalcanal. They interpreted the marines' landing as a small-scale strike. A single Japanese regiment of almost 2,500 men was shipped to the island with orders to drive the US force away.

The regiment's commander was Colonel Kiyonao Ichiki, an experienced soldier who later became an expert in infantry tactics. Ichiki was counting on his abilities, the superiority of his men and the reluctance of US soldiers to sacrifice their lives. He ordered an attack as soon as a third of his regiment had landed, east of the new US airbase.

Ichiki attacked in the early part of night, as was the Japanese custom, but his soldiers were soon caught in a hail of bullets. US machine guns and artillery massacred the entire first wave of the attack. Colonel Ichiki responded with a mortar bombardment before sending in a renewed attack. The carnage continued until sunrise, when the dawn light made it even easier for the marines to hit their targets.

"Jesus, anybody could have sliced them dumb bastards. They stood up, for Chrissake, they didn't even have the sense to crawl," an US machine gunner later recalled.

Afterwards, many marines expressed amazement at the primitive Japanese

The jungle had eyes

Allied agents hid on Guadalcanal and elsewhere in the Solomon Islands. From there, they sent reports about the Japanese, which became crucially important.

The Japanese met no resistance when they invaded the Solomon Islands in spring 1942. But Australian, British and New Zealand agents had already set up hiding places in the jungle, from where they could report on the activities of the occupying forces. These coastwatchers, as they were known, were hunted by the Japanese, but with the help of the locals, they were able to send invaluable observations via radio to Allied headquarters.

SECRET AIRSTRIP WAS REVEALED

British colonial administrator Martin Clemens warned the Allies that the Japanese were in the process of building an airbase on Guadalcanal. After the US marines arrived, Clemens and his local aides were the eyes and ears of the Allies in the island's deep jungles.

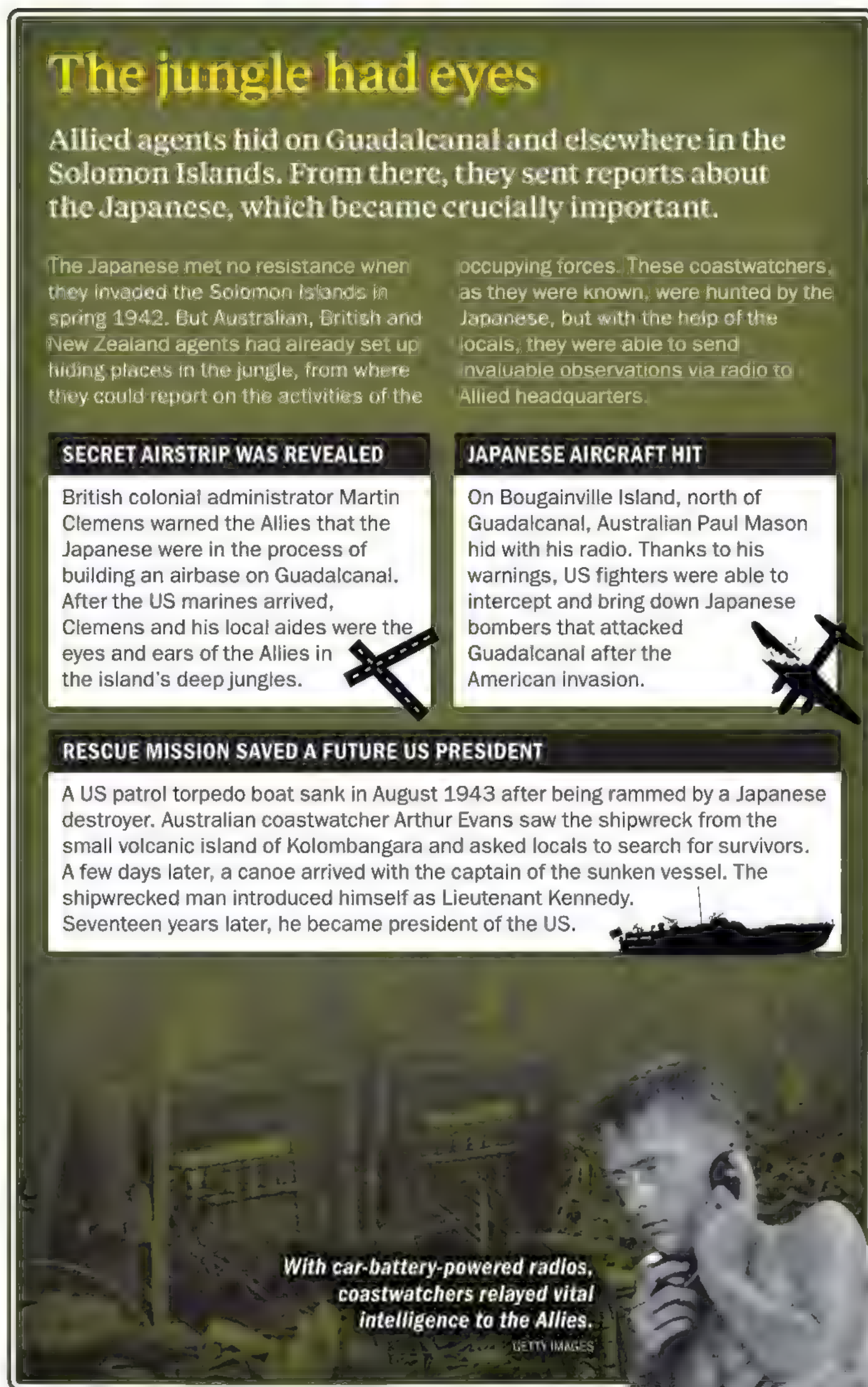
JAPANESE AIRCRAFT HIT

On Bougainville Island, north of Guadalcanal, Australian Paul Mason hid with his radio. Thanks to his warnings, US fighters were able to intercept and bring down Japanese bombers that attacked Guadalcanal after the American invasion.

RESCUE MISSION SAVED A FUTURE US PRESIDENT

A US patrol torpedo boat sank in August 1943 after being rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Australian coastwatcher Arthur Evans saw the shipwreck from the small volcanic island of Kolombangara and asked locals to search for survivors. A few days later, a canoe arrived with the captain of the sunken vessel. The shipwrecked man introduced himself as Lieutenant Kennedy. Seventeen years later, he became president of the US.

With car-battery-powered radios, coastwatchers relayed vital intelligence to the Allies.

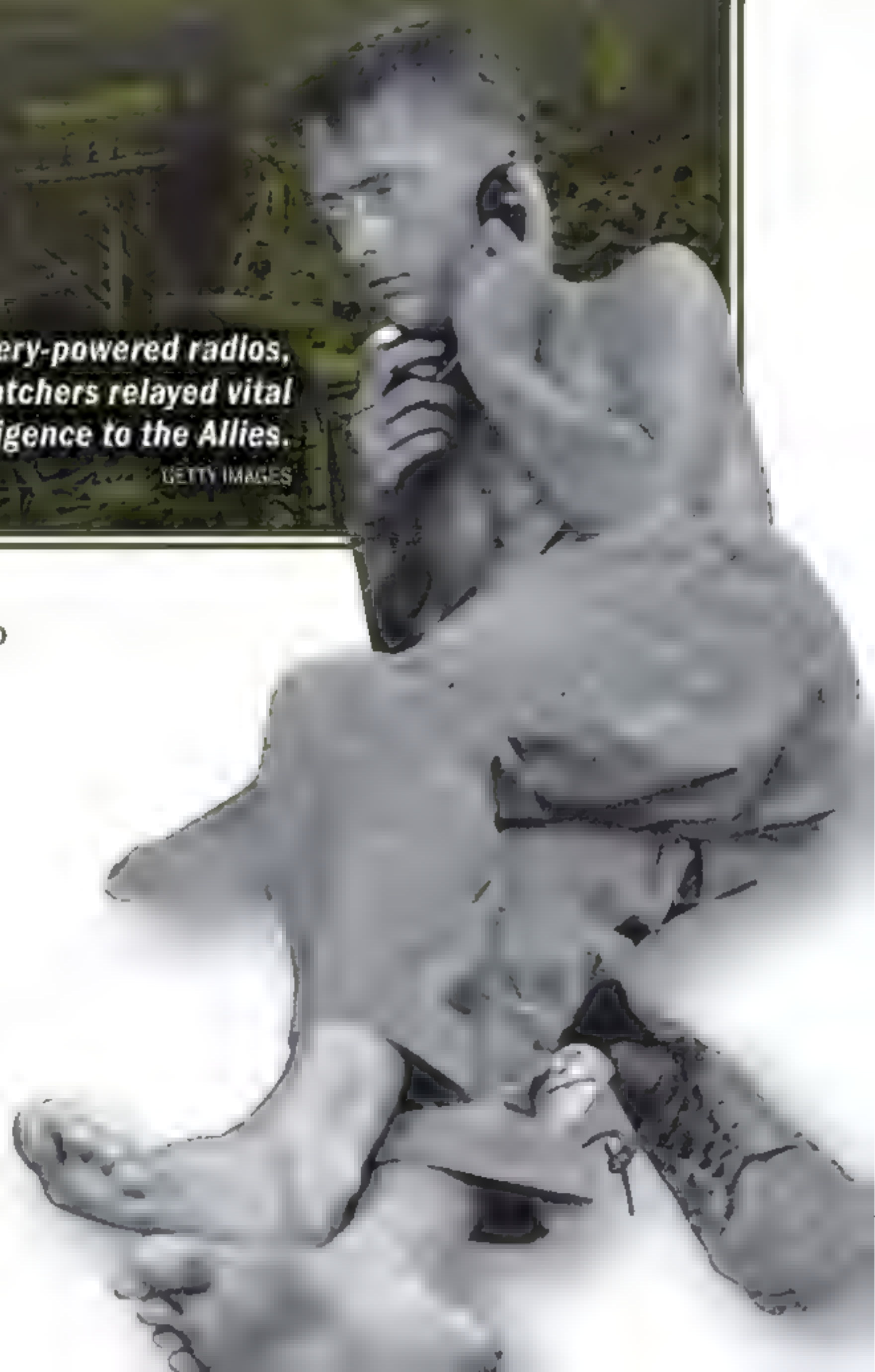


tactics and their fanatical willingness to sacrifice themselves.

"I've never heard of this kind of fighting," Vandegrift wrote to a colleague. "These people refuse to surrender. The wounded wait until men come up to examine them and blow themselves and the other fellow to pieces with a hand grenade."

After Colonel Ichiki's defeat, Imperial General Headquarters continued to build a powerful

»»



Jungle destroyed Japanese plan

In October 1942, the Japanese launched their largest attack on Guadalcanal. The objective was to capture the US airbase once and for all with a daring surprise attack. The plan took everything into account – except the tropical island's unyielding terrain.

1

7,000 MEN MOVE THROUGH THE JUNGLE

16th October 1942 Japanese General Maruyama plans to capture Henderson Field airfield with a surprise attack. Seven thousand men march along narrow paths through dense jungle. The trip takes a day longer than planned.

Henderson Field is of key strategic value. Planes can reach the entire South Pacific from here.

The **"Tokyo Express"** spends weeks landing troops and equipment for Maruyama's offensive.

For seven days Japanese soldiers creep forward on paths carved through the jungle by engineer troops.

US line of defence

Japanese attack forces

0 500 m 1,000 m

3

SHIPS BOMBARD FROM THE COAST

24th October In the morning, Japanese ships attack Henderson Field to soften up US defences ahead of Maruyama's attack. The hail of shells causes great damage, but the Japanese ships retreat when US bombers sink the cruiser Yura.

A coastal landing was impossible as US bombers would have destroyed the slow Japanese transport ships before troops could reach the beach.

Henderson Field, used by US bombers, was bombed by Japanese aircraft, artillery and ships.

The grass strip at Fighter 1 served as a runway for more than 20 US F4F Wildcat fighters.

The US line of defence was fortified with barbed wire, sandbags and 1,500 marines.

5 THE BREAKTHROUGH CHANCE IS LOST

24th October A hundred Japanese from different units manage to drive a wedge through the US line. But General Maruyama fails to reinforce the spearhead before the Americans' counter-attack and close the breach.

4

THE MAIN BATTLE BEGINS

24th October The Japanese main force attacks in the late evening, but its right wing hasn't yet arrived. Dense vegetation and rain block all radio signals, and messengers on foot get lost, leaving the attack completely uncoordinated. Each Japanese unit fights its own impossible battle.

6

THE RETREAT BECOMES A DEATH MARCH

26th October The Japanese offensive has failed and Maruyama's remaining troops are forced to retreat. All the food has long since gone and many starve as the column heads slowly back through the jungle.

2

DIVERSION COMES TOO SOON

23rd October Miserable radio conditions mean that Japanese forces on the coast don't receive a notification to delay their attack. Instead, they stick to the agreed plan and begin a diversionary attack to draw US attention away from the main force moving through the jungle. But as that force is late, the attack becomes a futile massacre.

American artillery soon dispatched Japan's light tanks.

Soldiers fought with miserable equipment



United States marine

Boys aged **18-19** made up the majority of the 1st Marine Division on Guadalcanal. However, the sergeants were experienced soldiers who had manned remote outposts in the 1930s and instilled the navy's strong corps spirit in their men.



Helmet was the new M1. Despite green paint and a rough surface, the helmet shone when wet, so some soldiers covered the metal with homemade nets.

The marines each carried up to four **Mk II "Frag"** grenades. The explosive power of the grenade was highly effective against the Japanese onslaught.



The **Springfield M1903** rifle was accurate, but had to be reloaded by hand after each shot. Fresh troops who arrived during the battle had the self-charging M1 Garand, giving them greater firepower.

Boots were lined and of high quality, but the high humidity in the jungle led to many marines getting gangrene on their feet.



The cotton uniform was durable but too thick and warm for combat in the tropics. In the strong sun, the olive green colour quickly faded to a pale grey-green.

V

Imperial Japanese soldier

War veterans filled the ranks of the Japanese units. They believed that **immortality awaited** anyone who gave his life for the emperor. The soldiers' sense of duty enabled them to starve to death at their post or sacrifice themselves in suicidal attacks.

Helmet was made of weak steel, which provided little protection. Some soldiers dropped the helmet to save weight, choosing to wear the cap instead.

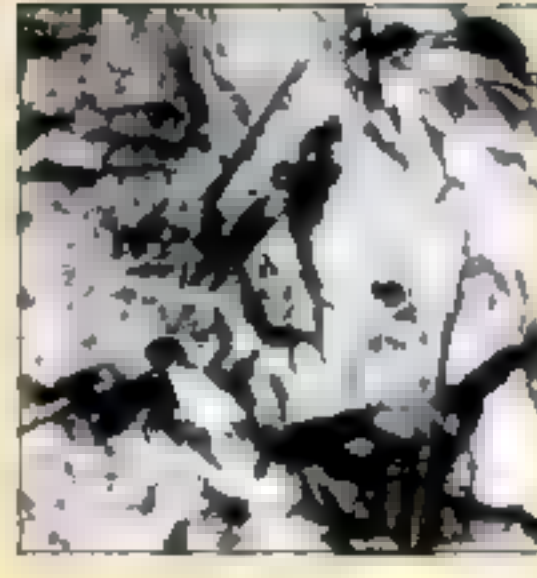


The **Arisaka Type 99** rifle was robust and suitable for night combat, as it emitted only a small muzzle flame, which could reveal the shooter. Unlike the American Garand, however, it had to be reloaded manually.



Straps of leather, horsehair or pigskin quickly rotted in the jungle terrain of Guadalcanal.

The **Bayonet** was 40 cm long and a favoured weapon among the Japanese. When marching through the jungle, however, it often got stuck in the vegetation.



Uniform Type 98 was made of thin cotton. It allowed the skin to breathe, but wear and high humidity quickly caused the fabric to dissolve.

Japanese **boots** were made of horse leather and quickly fell apart. As a result, many Japanese soldiers fought in sandals or barefoot.

force that would drive the Americans from Guadalcanal. In the following month, US and Japanese patrols fought fierce battles in the jungle, while high above, pilots duelled with the Japanese fighters who escorted bombers on their frequent runs across the island. Air forces on both sides suffered losses, but while US pilots could make emergency landings close to their airbase, the Japanese were far from home, and many perished in the sea.

The waves also engulfed countless supply ships, which arrived at the island at the wrong moment and met superior enemy ships. The fleets fought for dominance in the surrounding Pacific Ocean, and both sides lost several of their precious aircraft carriers.

King had to beg for help

Admiral King had to admit that he'd got a lot more than he'd bargained for back in spring. The Battle of Guadalcanal

required so many resources that the US Navy was no longer able to carry out the mission alone. Circumstances forced him to plead with the army for soldiers and aircraft that could replace the dilapidated forces on the island. Luck was on his side: the Battle of Guadalcanal had assumed such symbolic significance in the US media that withdrawal was now unthinkable. Public opinion forced the president to support an intensified effort.

Meanwhile, the Japanese military strategists stubbornly held on to their view that the Americans had only a few men and were so weakened that a sufficiently powerful push would drive them into the sea. And so, the stage was set for the decisive phase of the battle.

Japan's final attack

In October 1942, the Japanese force on Guadalcanal numbered 20,000 men. According to their own intelligence

reports, they had twice as many men as the Americans, and were ready to make a final attack. But the numbers were wrong; in fact, the US had as many as 23,000 soldiers to defend the now greatly expanded airbase.

The Japanese offensive began on 13th October, when two Japanese battle cruisers sailed along the coast, exposing the Americans to the worst bombing they'd experienced so far. At the airbase, 48 planes were turned into scrap metal, and large stocks of fuel disappeared in a sea of flames.

From hidden positions in the jungle, long-range Japanese guns joined in, and the devastation made it difficult for the US planes to take off. Now it was up to the Japanese soldiers on the ground to seize the moment.

But the attack never came. The Japanese soldiers were still on the march through the jungle and woefully behind schedule. They had only limited, infrequent contact with other forces because the jungle canopy blocked radio signals, meaning they were unable to request a delay. The diversionary attack on the coast therefore began a day too early and led to heavy Japanese losses that gained nothing.

The die was cast

Japanese General Masao Maruyama finally launched the main attack from the jungle on the night of 25th October. Although the plan had largely failed, he did succeed in getting 7,000 of his men through the jungle without the Americans discovering them.

Heavy rain fell as the Japanese prepared to attack. The rain dampened the noise that the troops made as they crept through the dark jungle to their starting positions. But they were still heard by US Sergeant Ralph Briggs, who lay in a hidden outpost in front of the rest of the defensive line.

"Colonel," the sergeant whispered into the mouthpiece of his field phone.

"There's about three thousand Japs between you and me."

"Are you sure?" asked Colonel Puller from the command post.

"Positive."

Puller had barely managed to sound the alarm before the first Japanese units launched their attack. They advanced with bayonets fixed to their rifles and the grim determination to win at all

The overnight "Tokyo Express" kept the Japanese alive

American air superiority forced the Japanese to transport troops to Guadalcanal on fast destroyers that appeared after sunset.

The Japanese had to transport soldiers, munitions and food to Guadalcanal under the cover of darkness. US planes made any such operation unthinkable in the daylight. Only the destroyers were fast enough to get out of the aircraft's range before sunrise. The overnight runs were dubbed the "Tokyo Express" by the Americans. The schedule and route were fixed and regular.

The night-time transport operations had serious limitations, however, because the destroyers were not built to transport heavy goods. Each ship

could carry a maximum of 150 men or 30-40 tonnes of supplies. It therefore took numerous expeditions to sail a regiment of soldiers to Guadalcanal, and it became increasingly difficult to supply enough provisions to the growing army on the island.

The destroyers also had no dock for unloading. Therefore, supplies had to be placed in steel barrels and tossed into the sea, close to land, where they floated until troops collected them. The method was so unreliable that well over half of the barrels never reached land.



The Japanese supply runs led to many night-time clashes with US ships.

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More than 25,000 Japanese soldiers died on Guadalcanal as a result of futile attacks and appalling living conditions.

SHUTTERSTOCK

costs. Coordination was impossible in the dark, so General Maruyama's troops simply charged the American line in a frontal assault.

As in previous battles, the attackers suffered gruesome losses to machine-gun salvos and barrages of hand grenades. Wave after wave staggered and collapsed in the carnage.

But then a cartridge jammed in one of the US machine guns. The Japanese took advantage of the opportunity and stormed forward. They stabbed the US soldiers who had been manning the machine-gun position before storming on. The great Japanese breakthrough seemed within reach. But a handful of US troops closed the hole behind the attackers, and all subsequent attacks were repulsed with murderous fire.

The fighting continued for hours until the US soldiers began to run out of ammunition. They requested permission to retire, but Colonel Puller demanded that they hold on, suggesting that if they ran out of bullets they should use bayonets.

The lack of ammunition, however, was far worse among the Japanese, as

many of them had jettisoned almost all of their supplies during their gruelling march through the jungle. Some of them went into the attack with as few as 15 cartridges.

The Americans, on the other hand, could continuously send reinforcements and supplies to threatened positions.

There were no more Japanese breakthroughs, and at dawn, Vandegrift's reserves wiped out the last Japanese troops. The attack had been another military disaster for the overconfident Japanese forces. Over 2,000 Japanese soldiers had fallen, compared to just 80 on the American side.

Marines were rewarded

The Americans' stubborn defence in October eventually secured their victory in the Battle of Guadalcanal. Japan's generals finally recognised that further operations on the island would simply cost more soldiers, aircraft and ships, which they couldn't afford to lose. From that point on, the Japanese fought a defensive action on Guadalcanal. They battled as tenaciously as ever, but couldn't hold their positions. After

another hard march through the jungle, the order was given in January 1943 for a Japanese evacuation.

By that time, General Vandegrift and his marines were no longer on the island. The army had taken over the Guadalcanal operation, and the exhausted troops from 1st Marine Division had sailed away to a well-deserved rest in Australia.

Vandegrift went on to participate in other Pacific Ocean invasions before travelling to Washington in 1944 to take over the post of commander-in-chief of the entire marine corps.

Alongside the great US victory at the Battle of Midway in the summer of 1942, the Battle of Guadalcanal became the turning point in the Pacific War. Japanese luck had finally run out, and their advance had been stopped. The Allies' long campaign towards Tokyo now began, retaking island after island.

The marine corps led the way in countless landings, and after the war came the reward. The division was detached from the US Navy and became an independent military force alongside the army, navy and air force. ■

The Allied invasion of Sicily

BERNARD MONTGOMERY

On the afternoon of 9th July 1943, 2,500 Allied warships gathered off the North African coast. On board were 160,000 American, British and Canadian troops. Led by Generals George S Patton and Bernard Montgomery, they had a shared goal: to capture the Mediterranean's most important island.

By Troels Ussing

The soldiers of the Allied fleet carefully studied their pamphlet about the ships' destination. It was 9th July 1943, and thousands of vessels loaded with soldiers, tanks and heavy artillery had been summoned from ports in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Rumours about the ships' destination had long been circulating among the soldiers, but it was only then – in the middle of the Mediterranean – that the final goal became clear.

"We thought we were going to England for the invasion of France, but when we got way into the sea, they started passing out pamphlets... *[Soldier's] Guide to Sicily*," said US soldier Andy Anguiano after the war.

The battle-ready troops were on their way to the Italian island of Sicily, where a major battle against German and Italian defence forces awaited. The operation was of the highest priority for the Allied leaders. Capturing the

Mediterranean island was crucial in two respects: firstly, it would secure Allied shipping in the Mediterranean, but more importantly, it would open up a whole new front against Hitler's Nazi Germany. And a new front would relieve the pressure on Stalin's Red Army on the Eastern Front, where war was being waged at full force in 1943.

Germans were squeezed

When the heavily armed warships left the North African coast in the summer of 1943, World War II had been raging for almost four years. At the end of 1942, Germany had control of every corner of the European continent, but when the Red Army launched a major offensive in Stalingrad in January 1943, the Nazi front began to crumble in the east. Hitler's army also met resistance in North Africa. By the autumn of 1942, the Allies had managed to gain ground in the region, and during the spring of 1943, the Allies expelled the last

German and Italian forces from the North African coast.

After the withdrawal of the Axis powers from North Africa, it was clear to all that the next step for the Allies would be an invasion somewhere in German-controlled western Europe. Until that fateful July day in 1943, the war in Europe had been fought almost exclusively on the Eastern Front; now Germany would be forced to fight on two fronts.

Sicily was crucial island

In early 1943, the leaders of the British and American armies recognised that an invasion of German-occupied France wasn't yet possible. So, the route to a new front would have to go through southern Europe – and it quickly became clear that the invasion should begin in Sicily. From the island's many ports and runways, German and Italian troops could easily attack shipping in the Mediterranean, which acted as a »



GEORGE S PATTON

**Tanks and thousands of troops
were moved from North Africa to
Sicily on 9th July 1943.**

ALAMY/IMAGESELECT, BRIDGEMAN & GETTY IMAGES

shortcut to the Far East. Control over Sicily would therefore stop the costly attacks and also provide access to the island's important airfields and ports for further invasion up through Italy and possibly the rest of Europe.

The Strait of Messina, which separated the north-east coast of Sicily from Fascist Italy, was only three kilometres wide, so Allied soldiers would have the European mainland within easy reach. The loss of the Mediterranean island would also increase the pressure on the Italian dictator, Mussolini, who risked losing his grip on power. With a little luck, Italy would soon be leaving the war.

Deception tricked Germans

Unfortunately for the British and Americans, Sicily's strategic importance was obvious: "Everyone but a bloody fool would know [the goal] is Sicily," the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, said scornfully before the invasion. He was right; after the loss of North Africa, both the German and Italian army commands had begun to strengthen the island's defences. If the Allied strategy was to succeed, it was crucial to weaken the defence on the island. So, the Allies embarked upon

one of history's most famous acts of deception: Operation Mincemeat.

A corpse disguised as a British officer was dumped into the sea off the Spanish coast. A random fisherman found the body and contacted the Spanish authorities. Chained to the body was a briefcase containing what appeared to be top-secret papers. From Spain, the contents of the case were sent to Germany and analysed by experts.

"I was right in the middle of it and had a swell time"

GENERAL PATTON IN A LETTER TO HIS WIFE, BEATRICE AYER PATTON (1943)

The conclusion was obvious: the Allies were preparing for an imminent invasion of Sardinia and Greece. Enthusiastic about the discovery of the secret papers, the Axis Powers halted their strengthening of Sicily's defence. Instead, entire divisions and tonnes of heavy artillery were transported to

Sardinia and Greece. The Allied leaders could hardly believe their luck. The Germans had fallen straight into their trap. Barely two months later, they were ready to begin the invasion – of Sicily.

Soldiers were seasick

A few hours after midnight on 10th July 1943, the invasion fleet anchored off the coast of Sicily. Large rope nets were thrown over the railings, and one by one the soldiers climbed down the sides of the ships into the landing craft. The waves were several metres high, and a combination of seasickness and anxiety caused many soldiers to vomit. The sticky mess at the bottom of the boats, slopped around the soldiers made their way to the benches.

Shortly afterwards, the first wave of landing craft sailed towards their destination on the Sicilian coast. They were met by 300,000 Italian troops and 40,000 German elite soldiers who were ready to defend the key island.

"We had never been in battle before and we were all scared. We didn't know what to expect," said US soldier Alfred Hook when interviewed after the war.

The overall strategy for the invasion was devised by Dwight D Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the American

The majority of American troops had not been in combat before arriving in Sicily.

US ARMY



Forces in Europe, and Briton Harold Alexander, commander-in-chief of the invasion. According to the plan, Sicily was to be taken from the south. From there, the Allied troops were to fight their way across the island, city by city. Under the command of General Bernard Montgomery, the British Eighth Army would land on the island's south-east coast, then, with the help of Canadian forces, they would fight north along the coast to eventually capture the impressive and strategically important port city of Messina.

To protect Montgomery's flank, US forces would be led by General George S Patton's Seventh Army west of the British at the beaches near the town of Gela. From there, the Americans would move in a north-westerly direction. A total of 150,000 men were to land during the first day.

200 men drowned

The invasion itself began with a large-scale airborne manoeuvre. The plan was for US paratroopers to drop near the town of Gela, from where they would create a safe zone down to the coast, where Patton's troops would soon come ashore. At the same time, British soldiers would arrive by glider and capture a number of important bridges on the south-east coast of Sicily.

As the paratroopers approached the island just after midnight, it was clear that there were serious problems. Near Sicily, a strong gale was blowing, and the wind was knocking both planes and paratroopers off course, making it impossible for the men to be dropped over their planned targets.

"I was dropped 55 miles from the drop zone, completely out of the American zone of operation," recalled T Moffatt Burriss, a US paratrooper who spent several hours trying to work out where he was.

For the British gliders, the situation was even worse. Although the majority of the soldiers had gained experience in North Africa, only 12 of the 144 gliders reached their targets. As many as 69 of the aircraft were tossed around in the strong wind and crashed into the sea – more than 200 Britons fought in vain against the waves and died before the invasion had even begun.

Even though Allied warships had recently bombed the German and >>>

Friendly fire and strong winds cost dearly

The invasion of Sicily began disastrously for the Allied airborne troops who launched the attack shortly after midnight. Gliders, which should have landed close to key positions, were blown into the sea by strong winds, while paratroopers were shelled by their own invasion fleet and dropped up to a hundred kilometres away from their planned drop zones.

METEOROLOGISTS MISJUDGED THE WIND

The weather was against the Allies on the night of the invasion on 10th July. Strong winds scattered the planes bearing the airborne forces, resulting in

paratroopers landing so far apart that they couldn't regroup as planned.

Several landed almost 100 kilometres from their drop zones and had no idea where they were. Even worse was the situation for the Allied gliders, which were tossed around in the air by violent gusts of wind. Almost all the light aircraft fell into the sea, where their crews drowned. Out of 137 gliders, only 12 reached their destination in Sicily.



US NAVY SHOT DOWN TRANSPORT PLANES

To support American troops landing near the coastal town of Gela, parachute reserves from the 82nd Airborne Division were dropped late in the evening of 11th July. But as the aeroplanes bearing the paratroopers flew over the invasion fleet off the Sicilian coast, the ships opened fire. The ships' officers had mistaken them for approaching German bombers. Panicking, they shot down 23 of the 144 planes, and 229 Americans lost their lives as a result of poor communication. Two days later, the disastrous mistake was repeated when the fleet fired on British paratroopers en route to a drop zone further inland.



PATTON AND MONTGOMERY LET THE ENEMY ESCAPE

The Axis powers evacuated over 100,000 troops and 10,000 vehicles from Sicily before the Allies reached Messina. The evacuation was subsequently labelled catastrophic by the Allies. Military historians believe that Patton and

Montgomery were too focussed on being the first to reach Messina, and so neglected the chance to disrupt the enemy's retreat. "The Germans have undoubtedly in one way scored a decisive success. ... They have been able to evacuate their forces almost intact having suffered very few casualties," said British Lieutenant-Colonel Lionel Wigram.





Loss of Sicily cost Mussolini his power

At the beginning of the war, Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini was riding high, but with the Axis crisis in 1943, he became a melancholic and unpopular leader. So, two weeks after Sicily was invaded by Allied troops on 10th July, the dictator was deposed at a meeting of the Grand Council of Fascism. "Benito è finito!" cheered the jubilant Italians when a radio broadcast announced the fall of the Fascist.

Although German commandos subsequently freed Mussolini, and had him reinstated as leader of the Republic of Salò in northern Italy, he was, in fact, finished. At the end of the war, he and his mistress tried to flee to Switzerland, but were stopped by Italian partisans. On 28th April 1945, they were executed and their bodies strung up at a petrol station in a busy public square.

Mussolini lost power during the Allied invasion of Sicily.

GETTY IMAGES

Italian defences from the sea, it was clear that the task wasn't going to be easy as the landing craft set course for the beaches on Sicily's south-east coast.

German planes spread chaos

The commander of the craft that US soldier Andy Anguiano was in counted down: "Five, four, three, two, one!"

The situation had been run through countless times, and everyone knew the significance of the signal. Without looking back, the young infantryman ran across the boat's ramp and into the enemy's hail of bullets.

The coast at Gela, where the US Seventh Army landed, was the island's most-protected area. Italian soldiers lay hidden behind sand dunes and rocks, ready to shoot. They fired relentlessly at the Americans as they ran from the landing craft and across the beach.

"Sometimes you don't even hear the fire but you see somebody go down ... There was nothing we could do for them," US soldier Jake Jacobson remembered sadly after the war.

The situation was chaotic, and the operation had barely begun before things became even worse. German fighters bombed the Allied warships, increasing the pressure on the US force, which needed time to disembark its soldiers and equipment.

Fortunately, foresight on the part of the Americans meant they'd brought a

newly developed vehicle to Sicily: the DUKW, colloquially known as the Duck. The amphibious vehicle proved indispensable. With a top speed of 80 kilometres per hour, even on the sandy beaches of Sicily, the Americans were able to quickly transport both troops and weapons to the beach. The first stage of the Sicily campaign was over.

Soldiers helped by bad weather

Although the Americans faced fierce resistance, the situation wasn't as bad as it could have been. The airborne divisions had paid a high price for the bad weather – but the infantrymen benefited from it. The island's defenders refused to believe that anyone would attack in such strong winds, so were unprepared for the invasion.

For Jake Jacobsen and his comrades, that meant that the Italian defenders retreating towards the middle of the island after a few hours of fighting.

On the morning of 11th July, General Patton drove triumphantly through the town of Gela. However, the celebratory mood quickly turned to fear as, in the distance, dust was seen rising from a column of German Tiger tanks. In order to halt the American advance, the Italian Army commander Alfredo Guzzoni had reorganised his troops and sent his best force, the German Hermann Göring division, against the Americans. As the 60-tonne machines

approached, the ground shook beneath the Americans' feet.

"Kill every one of the goddam bastards!" Patton incited his men, while personally helping a mortar section set up their weapons.

"It's a scary feeling because we had nowhere to go. With those 88-[mm guns] coming at you, they'll blow the whole place up to get you. ... You just learn how to pray," Jacobson recalled.

The infantryman's prayers were apparently heard, as a radio operator alerted a warship that had survived the fighter jets' bombardment. The ship came to the rescue of the Americans.

"The [ship's guns] were opening those tanks up like a can of sardines," Jacobson later said.

His heart lifted as the German armoured division was forced to turn around. Now Gela was taken, the landing secured, and the Axis Powers' best division had been forced to retreat.

"God certainly watched over me today," General Patton noted with relief in his diary that evening.

In a letter to his wife, Beatrice, he also recounted the dramatic events of the day: "I was right in the middle of it and had a swell time."

British troops hit problems

Unlike the Americans at Gela, Montgomery's British and Canadian infantry troops faced significantly less resistance in south-east Sicily. It was different, however, for the British paratroopers who, on the night of 13th July, had to capture the strategically important Primrose Bridge. The 120-metre-long steel structure was the only way over the Simeto River, which had to be crossed if the British Eighth Army was to fight its way up the east coast of Sicily.

Once again, the airborne forces were hit by disaster. While being shelled by enemy fire on their way across Sicily, a communication failure resulted in them also being shelled by Allied warships. Out of 1,900 paratroopers, only 300 reached their target.

The British forces' odds weren't improved by the fact that the Italian troops were bolstered by German elite soldiers who had flown in from France – just to defend the crucial bridge.

What should have been a quick victory became a three-day

»»

Invasion transformed into a race to Messina

In the initial phase, the invasion of Sicily went according to plan. The British advanced along the east coast of the island, and the Americans acted as flank support. But the invasion's commander-in-chief, Harold Alexander, insisted that Messina's capture be achieved by Montgomery, even as the Eighth Army stalled on the east coast. That made Patton furious. Hungry for glory, he first stormed the capital, Palermo, then embarked upon a race to Messina.

Balance of forces in Sicily

Invasion forces:
Soldiers: **478,000**
Tanks: **600**

Defenders:
Soldiers: **350,000**
Tanks: **260**

Number killed during fighting

Invasion forces:
Americans: **2,237**
British: **2,721**
Canadians: **562**

Defenders:
Italians: **4,700**
Germans: **4,300**

The urban battles in Gela, Troina and at the Primosole Bridge were among the toughest.

5 PALERMO IS LIBERATED

22ND JULY: Patton and his forces liberate the port city of Palermo and continue on towards Messina. Five days after the victory in Palermo, the Germans begin to withdraw.

6 BATTLES IN MOUNTAINS

6TH AUGUST: In the northern mountains of the island, in particular the town of Troina, the Germans fiercely resist the invading forces. The fighting slows the Americans for a week.

7 PATTON WINS THE RACE TO THE CITY OF MESSINA

17TH AUGUST: In the morning, a few hours before the British arrive, Patton drives into Messina. Sicily is now undeniably in Allied hands.

4 BITTER DEFENCE AT ETNA

BEGINNING OF AUGUST: The Axis Powers have established a strong line of defence at Mount Etna. For weeks, Montgomery is stuck on the ridges around the volcano. Only in early August do the British finally fight their way past.

3 BRITISH CAPTURE BRIDGE

16TH JULY: After three days of intense fighting, British paratroopers finally capture the strategically important Primosole Bridge. Now the British can continue up the coast.

2 PATTON FACES TOUGH OPPOSITION

10TH-11TH JULY: Italian and German troops counter-attack just north of Gela. After fierce fighting, the Americans overcome the enemy and can begin securing the flank of the British invasion forces.

1 INVASION BEGINS

10TH JULY: The Allies attack under cover of night. While the British encounter few problems at the southern tip of Sicily, the Americans experience rough seas and fierce resistance on the western beaches.



Patton always had a revolver in his belt.

DAVE ALLEN



The British and US troops raced to be first to reach Messina and arrived just a few hours apart.

BRIDGEMAN

*“Kill every
one of the
goddam
bastards!”*

GENERAL PATTON IN SICILY (1943)

nightmare for all sides: “There were a lot of bodies lying around. There were Germans, paratroopers, our lads, everybody there. We had to pile them one on top of the other instead of sandbags to stop the German attack,” recalled British soldier Arthur Goodsell.

Only on 16th July, when the British finally received reinforcements in the form of American Sherman tanks, did they succeed in capturing the bridge. But the price was high.

“It gave me nightmares. It took me many years to recover from it,” remembered Goodsell.

Germans fortified Messina

After seizing Primosole Bridge, the capture of Messina seemed within reach for the British. That prompted the Germans to relocate their troops and create a fortified line of defence at Mount Etna and the eastern region of Sicily. German elite troops were sent to the area, and the Hermann Göring division had to fight once again. The Germans made every effort to block the route to the strategically important city.

The defence at Etna was effective, and for weeks, the British Eighth Army was stuck on the island’s east coast. As corpses piled up between the rocks, and the stench of death spread in the summer heat, many of the British men found themselves wishing they were back in North Africa.

Even if the British wanted to give up, however, the leader of the invasion, Harold Alexander, wouldn’t change the plan – Messina was earmarked for Montgomery.

West of the British, US troops were advancing across Sicily. Although both German and Italian troops were fighting in the east, much of the island was left to Italian soldiers who, after the loss of Primosole Bridge, no longer believed victory was possible.

“90 percent of the Italian Army are cowards and do not want to fight,” said German General Conrath scathingly.

US General Patton was furious that Montgomery was still going to be the one to capture Messina, and contrary to Alexander’s orders, he stormed the Sicilian capital, Palermo. If he couldn’t

have Messina, he would at least capture the capital.

On 22nd July, American troops were able to capture the thousand-year-old city with scarcely a shot being fired, and they also took several thousand Italian prisoners of war.

In Palermo, the Americans were greeted with cheers from the war-weary Italians, and back home in the United States, General Patton was extravagantly praised for his efforts in the American press.

The triumph excited Patton, and he soon saw his chance to capture the city of Messina himself via Sicily’s northern coastal road and a mountain route that ran a little further south: “This is a horse race, in which the prestige of the US Army is at stake. We must take Messina before the British,” he exhorted his officers.

Axis Powers evacuated

Following Patton’s capture of Palermo, it was clear that Sicily was lost. On 27th July, the Axis Powers therefore changed their strategy. The goal of the defence

troops was now no longer to drive out the Allies, but instead to escape to the Italian mainland by crossing the Strait of Messina – with as many troops and as much equipment as possible. The Germans and Italians who were still fighting therefore had to do everything in their power to pull out so that their men and equipment could cross the sea.

Fighting still raged

Jake Jacobson was among the soldiers Patton led along the winding road through Sicily's northern mountain landscape. He soon learnt that a new nightmare awaited them in the mountain village of Troina. Here, the fighting became so violent that hundreds of wounded American soldiers had to be withdrawn.

On 3rd August, Patton made his way past one of the army hospitals. The general was greatly moved at the sight of wounded soldiers who had lost limbs in the war. But he had no compassion for those who were suffering from psychological trauma.

In order to reach Messina before Montgomery – who, in the meantime, was struggling on the east coast – he would need every man possible. So, the general was sceptical when he met an infantryman who was clearly suffering from shell shock.

When Patton asked the soldier where he was hurt, he simply shrugged and explained: "I guess I can't take it."

Trembling with rage, Patton slapped the soldier's face with his gloves and pulled him out of the tent.

"You coward. ... You're going back to the front!" he shouted, and kicked the soldier in the back.

A few days later, Patton exploded again during a hospital visit. In a rage, he ended up pulling out his gun and threatening to shoot a private for his cowardice.

"There's no such thing as shell shock!" roared Patton, according to a war correspondent who witnessed the general's outburst.

Eisenhower subsequently ordered his general to apologise to the two soldiers and the staff at the hospitals.

While the US Army tried to smooth things over, Patton continued on his way to capture Messina.

"Patton wanted to be in the lead and he wanted to be there first. He just

pushed, pushed, pushed," explained infantryman Alfred Hook after the war, while Jake Jacobson noticed that the general was "going through these towns like a bat out of hell".

By mid-August, victory was finally within the general's reach.

Patton got to the port city first

Darkness was about to descend over Messina on 16th August 1943, when the first soldiers from Patton's Seventh Army rolled into the city. The Americans carefully scouted ahead and were wary every time they rounded a street corner – but no German bullets whistled past their ears. The next morning, US troops declared the Mediterranean city occupied.

General Patton was delighted when, at 10.00 on 17th August, he drove

through the streets and was hailed as Messina's liberator. A few hours later, the first of Montgomery's British troops finally arrived – only to realise that they were too late.

Respectfully, the unit's commander greeted Patton: "It was a jolly good race. I congratulate you," said the British officer.

The battle for Sicily was finally over, but the enemy had succeeded in carrying out a very successful evacuation of troops and equipment. Over 110,000 soldiers with more than 10,000 vehicles and tonnes of ammunition and other gear had been shipped to the Italian mainland. For the American general, however, it didn't really matter. He had taken Messina – and soon the Allies would take the rest of Italy. ■

Triumph was tainted by war crimes

During the invasion of Sicily, Patton impressed everyone with his 'blitzkrieg' through the island's mountainous terrain. But his fiery rhetoric led some of his men to break the rules of war – with fatal consequences.

In addition to abusing soldiers suffering from shell shock, Patton's legacy after the invasion of Sicily was tainted by a far worse crime. Some of his men in the 45th Infantry Division later testified that before the landing, the general gave a speech declaring that no prisoners should be taken.

Allegedly as a result of this speech, a captain and sergeant executed 73 unarmed prisoners in cold blood on 14th July 1943.

The culprits were brought before a court martial where both claimed to have been acting on the general's orders that were given during the speech. The sergeant was given a life sentence – though this was later remitted.

Patton himself explained that his speech had been misunderstood and there was never any intention to harm prisoners. He was exonerated and the whole scandal was hushed up

during the war for fear of what it might do to morale.

The case was only made public a few years after the war. By then, Patton was dead: he was killed in a car accident in Germany on 21st December 1945 – the day before he was to return to the US.





Sabotage paved the way for D-Day

The invasion of the Normandy coast in 1944 is largely remembered for the heroic landing of Allied soldiers. But without the French resistance movement, the operation would not have been possible. Across France, 50,000 underground fighters prepared for D-Day.

By Paul Siersbæk

Top French cyclist Guillaume Mercader woke early on 5th June 1944 and leapt into his clothes. He had a long day of training ahead as he cycled out of his sleepy home town of Bayeux, braving the strong westerly wind that blew in from the Normandy coast, a few kilometres away. As he rode north, he noticed that there were more Allied bombers in the air than usual, and that they seemed to be heading towards targets inland.

That afternoon, Mercader put his bike back in his shed. He had to be in his basement by 18.00, ready to listen to the BBC's French radio broadcast because Mercader wasn't just a French cycling hero with a cabinet full trophies – for the past three years, he had been

training on the coastal roads near his home, something which was only possible because the Gestapo had agreed that as a sports star he could have a special permit. The area was off-limit to others to guard the secrets of the German's Atlantic Wall defence.

When German soldiers on the road waved to the cyclist, bent over his handlebars, they had no idea that Mercader's mind was scarcely on his training; he was, in fact, gathering information about every single bunker, machine gun and troop movement he saw. And he quickly passed the knowledge he amassed to the British.

Mercader sat in the Bayeux basement with his ears pricked. Through the radio, he heard messages conveyed by the BBC. Finally, the phrase "*Il fait*

chaud à Suez" ("It's hot in Suez"). Then followed "*Les dés sont sur la table*" ("The dice are on the table"). The two innocent sentences were actually coded messages that Guillaume Mercader had been waiting months to hear.

He now knew that the Allied invasion was imminent. Early the next day, about 175,000 Britons, Americans and Canadians would try to land on the Normandy coast, a few kilometres from Bayeux. But in order for the soldiers to gain a foothold, it was crucial for the French resistance movement to sabotage the Germans' war effort by blowing up railways and bridges.

Mercader swung on to his bike and pedalled through the moonlit town to muster his resistance group of 90 men, including three gendarmes and a few »



Guillaume Mercader was a well-known cyclist from Normandy. He owned a bike workshop in his hometown of Bayeux.

France, 50,000 men and women from la Résistance were preparing for a critical battle against the Germans.

D-Day was coming, and there would be a warm welcome for the Allies.

Germany launched blitzkrieg

Although, in June 1944, the French resistance movement emerged as a well-disciplined underground army, which sapped the German Army's strength with highly targeted operations, its success was by no means a given.

Four years earlier, the French had received a devastating lesson in modern warfare. With new tanks and Stuka bombers, the Germans began their lightning war to the west, and the three-billion-franc French defences, the Maginot Line, were useless to stop them. Instead of storming the heavily armed French bulwark, Hitler simply sent his armies through neutral Belgium – and bypassed Maginot entirely.

One of the French officers caught up in the German invasion was Charles de Gaulle. The professional soldier had fought heroically during World War I, where he had been wounded twice and ended up in German captivity. There he gave impassioned speeches to his fellow prisoners – and became known nationally for his escape attempt wearing women's clothing.

In the interwar years, the temperamental de Gaulle liked to air his controversial opinions – for instance, he

was against fixed defences, like the Maginot Line, and argued for a mobile armoured defence. His love of argument gave him a reputation among French officers of being poorly raised.

During the 1940 blitzkrieg, de Gaulle – with 200 small tanks – managed to repel a German attack on Montcornet. The achievement was so remarkable that he was promoted to Under-Secretary of State for National Defence and War.

In this role, de Gaulle held meetings with the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, among others, to discuss the possible evacuation of the French Army to Morocco, from where France would continue the fight against Nazi Germany.

Meanwhile, Hitler's offensive through France continued unabated. On 16th June, German soldiers captured Paris – and the last remnants of French defensive will crumbled. The next day, de Gaulle left, heading for London, where Churchill offered him the chance to give a speech to his countrymen via the BBC.

A country with two leaders

France was defeated and the prime minister resigned. On 18th June, the country's future leader, former Deputy Prime Minister Philippe Pétain, gave a radio speech in which he prepared the nation for the impending surrender to the Germans:

***“Must we
abandon all
hope? Is our
defeat final and
irremediable? To
those questions I
answer – No!”***

CHARLES DE GAULLE

“It is with a heavy heart that I say to you today that it is necessary to cease fighting. I have this evening approached the enemy to ask if he is ready to try to find, between soldiers, with the struggle

over and in honour, the means to put an end to the hostilities.”

That same day, de Gaulle settled into one of the BBC's studios in London. His practice giving speeches while in captivity during World War I stood him in good stead now that he needed to incite the French to continue the struggle for freedom:

“Must we abandon all hope? Is our defeat final and irremediable? To those questions I answer – No! ... Honour, common sense and the interests of the country require that all Frenchmen, wherever they be, should continue the fight as best they may.”

De Gaulle's warlike words sent a shiver through British politicians who'd hoped to build an alliance with Philippe Pétain and join him in defeating Hitler's Germany. But Churchill offered the French general a helping hand, so that de Gaulle could form the *Forces françaises libres* (FFL) – Free French Forces – using the approximately 7,000 soldiers who had been evacuated from Dunkirk with the British in June 1940.

In France, Pétain willingly surrendered to the Germans. Hitler's demands were tough, but he did allow a so-called free zone in the south-eastern part of the country, with the city of Vichy as its capital. The free zone was given French rule, with Pétain at the helm, and stringent German guidelines on how life should unfold there. For example, Vichy introduced strict laws regarding Jews and agreed to pay for the German occupation of the country – 20 million Reichsmarks a day. The release of French prisoners of war after the defeat was out of the question – the soldiers had to work in German factories and in agriculture.

The first scattered resistance

Resentment over the defeat – and Pétain's subsequent betrayal – was great among the French people, and the first acts of resistance began in the summer of 1940. They were scattered, uncoordinated, and usually arose spontaneously as a result of the injustices that individuals experienced with the occupying power.

Among them was Joseph Barthelet from Metz. He was driven to join the resistance when he saw one of his friends beaten and interrogated by the secret German police, the Gestapo: “I

recognised him only by his hat. Only by his hat...I saw his face all right, but there was no skin on it, and he could not see me. Both his poor eyes had been closed into two purple and yellow bruises."

On 7th September, the first saboteur was executed: 19-year-old Pierre Roche, who had cut German telephone wires.

The angry French found themselves in groups that often hated each other more than they hated the occupying power, because they came from such vastly different camps – socialists, Communists, anarchists, conservatives and radical nationalists. In practice, the divisions meant that one group wasn't even interested in what another was doing. For example, a resistance group in Bordeaux carried out an attack on a German depot, for which another group had spent weeks preparing. There were also unfortunate mistakes, such as when one resistance group killed a French gendarme who was suspected of being a German collaborator, but who

was actually a messenger for another group of freedom fighters.

The need for a coordinated effort was obvious, and as de Gaulle couldn't personally take control in his homeland, a leader with all-round credibility was required. The choice fell on Jean Moulin, a 41-year-old official who'd had several trusted posts in the service of the state. In 1936, for example, he was employed in the Ministry of Aviation and was responsible for the secret dispatch of aircraft and pilots to the Spanish Civil War.

When the Germans occupied France, Moulin was prefect of the Chartres district near Paris. He tried to keep a cool head and make the administration function under the new conditions. The Germans appreciated his efforts, but Moulin soon got into trouble when he refused to make a false testimony.

Captured and tortured

During the German invasion of the area in June 1940, a French woman had

been killed in a bomb attack. Now the occupying forces claimed that the woman had actually been murdered by colonial Senegalese soldiers. Jean Moulin refused to sign the German indictment and was imprisoned.

The Germans had already begun to suspect Moulin of being a Communist, and he was subjected to torture to force the truth out of him. During a break in the interrogations, Moulin tried to put an end to his suffering by cutting his throat with a piece of glass. The suicide attempt failed, but Moulin escaped captivity and was able to continue as prefect for some time – albeit with an unsightly scar on his neck.

On 3rd November 1940, the Vichy government passed a decree stating that all left-wing mayors in the free zone should be deposed. Prefect Moulin was fired when he refused to carry out the order in his area, and he quickly fled underground.

Meanwhile, the newly formed British sabotage organisation, the Special >>>

Hitler divided France in two

After the victory, the German leader decided to set up a free zone, where the French could (almost) rule themselves.

The Germans contented themselves with occupying 60 percent of France after their victory in 1940. The area covered the strategically important Atlantic coast and the major industrial areas. The south-

eastern remnant of the country was set up as a 'free zone', managed by the French themselves. This enabled Germany to save on troops. The free zone had the spa town of Vichy, with its many

hotels, as its capital. As head of state the French appointed 84-year-old Marshal Philippe Pétain, a hero of World War I. Throughout his leadership, he pursued a pro-German policy, calling for a national revolution. Like the Nazis, he built his revolution on values such as work and physical exercise. Only on one point did Pétain not give in: Vichy-France was neutral, and therefore didn't enter the war on the German side.



Support for Nazism was strong in Vichy. In October 1940, Pétain met with Hitler.

GETTY IMAGES & IMAGESELECT

Plane drops in daylight were rare; usually, the British aircraft arrived at night. Residents marked the delivery site with burning torches.

GETTY IMAGES

Churchill delivered aid from the sky

Resistance fighters in occupied Europe received weapons, explosives and communications equipment from England.

Shortly after France's surrender, the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, set up a new secret organisation – the Special Operations Executive. Its agents were to wage war behind enemy lines and

encourage resistance movements in German-occupied countries to fight. "Set Europe

ablaze," was Churchill's order. In France, the SOE landed about 400 agents, instructors and radio operators, and organised the dropping of tonnes of supplies for resistance groups.

Danish resistance fighters also benefited from the SOE: the organisation's supplies made it possible to carry out around a thousand major acts against the Germans in Denmark.

CONTAINER FULL OF SUPPLIES

Between 1941 and 1944, the French resistance movement received 73,918 containers. They contained weapons, ammunition, explosives, food and so on.

When the approximately 160-kilogram containers were dropped, they had to be collected quickly before the Germans reached the drop-off point.

GETTY IMAGES & OSPREY PUBLISHING

Operations Executive (SOE), had become aware of Jean Moulin's bid to unite the French resistance.

During 1941, the SOE had sent more than a hundred agents into France to encourage the country's resistance groups. Now agents approached Moulin to invite him to London, where de Gaulle was waiting.

However, it would be several months before Moulin was able to leave his homeland. He spent the intervening time growing his contacts among the freedom fighters, and met with the leaders of some of the country's largest resistance groups – Combat, France Liberté and Libération-Sud.

When Moulin finally reached London on 19th October 1941, he brought with him invaluable knowledge of occupied France. The SOE leaders were so enthusiastic about the Frenchman that they tried to persuade him to work for the British instead of de Gaulle – Moulin politely declined.

De Gaulle the general and Moulin the official complemented each other perfectly, and after a few days of talks, Moulin declared his complete loyalty to de Gaulle, who in turn appointed Moulin as his representative in France.

At 03:00 on 2nd January 1942, Jean Moulin, along with a bodyguard and a radio operator, parachuted from an RAF plane into the cold winter night over France, somewhere between Avignon and Aix-en-Provence.

Arrested by the Gestapo

Jean Moulin had embarked on a dangerous chapter in his life, living under the pseudonym Max. He was constantly on the move to coordinate the resistance. As a cover for his frequent journeys and meetings, he opened an art gallery in Nice.

Moulin's first major task was to get the various groups to accept the angular military man, de Gaulle, as leader.

In January 1943, the resistance groups Combat, Liberté and Liberation managed to unite to become *Mouvements Unis de Résistance*, or MUR.

But the groups continued to distrust each other and their motives for entering the fight against the Germans. The lack of trust made it easier for the Gestapo and the SS

intelligence service Sicherheitsdienst (SD) to break up resistance groups. Using infiltration and torture against suspected freedom fighters enabled the Germans to discover meeting places and a number of cover names – including Max. The net tightened around Jean Moulin.

On 21st June 1943, an important meeting was to take place at a doctor's home in Lyon. Several high-ranking resistance fighters were present, including Moulin. Around 15.00, once all the participants had arrived, two cars pulled up in front of the house. Eight armed SD men jumped out, surrounded the building and shouted: "Hands up! German police!"

The doctor's house had just one entrance – so the freedom fighters were trapped. The German captain Klaus Barbie, known as the Butcher of Lyon, strolled in and arrested them all.

"Who is Max?" roared Barbie during the interrogations that followed. He wanted to find the resistance movement's central figure – and one of the captives had to be Max. The prisoners remained silent, despite being tortured.

Two days later, Barbie was confident he knew who Max was. He had to be the slender middle-aged man among the prisoners. Now the torture began in earnest. Fellow prisoners witnessed how Moulin was dragged unconscious back to his cell after Barbie's interrogations. As the days went by, the 'Butcher' broke Moulin's arms and both legs, as well as most of his ribs. But the Frenchman said nothing. Instead, he was taken for fresh interrogation at the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. He had to be carried in on a stretcher, and the German officers were so outraged by Barbie's methods that they sent the prisoner on to Germany by train, but Moulin died of his injuries en route.

Despite Klaus Barbie's barbaric torture, the resistance leader hadn't said a word about his comrades and their secret preparations to support the Allied invasion of France.

French youths on the run

With Moulin's death, things became more difficult for the French resistance – and the ties that the leader had

SOE transport planes could land in a ploughed field

The British Westland Lysander aircraft took part in the Battle of France in 1940 as an observation aircraft, but with a top speed of only 340 kilometres per hour, it was an easy target for German anti-aircraft guns and fighter jets. Instead, the plane was successfully redeployed to the

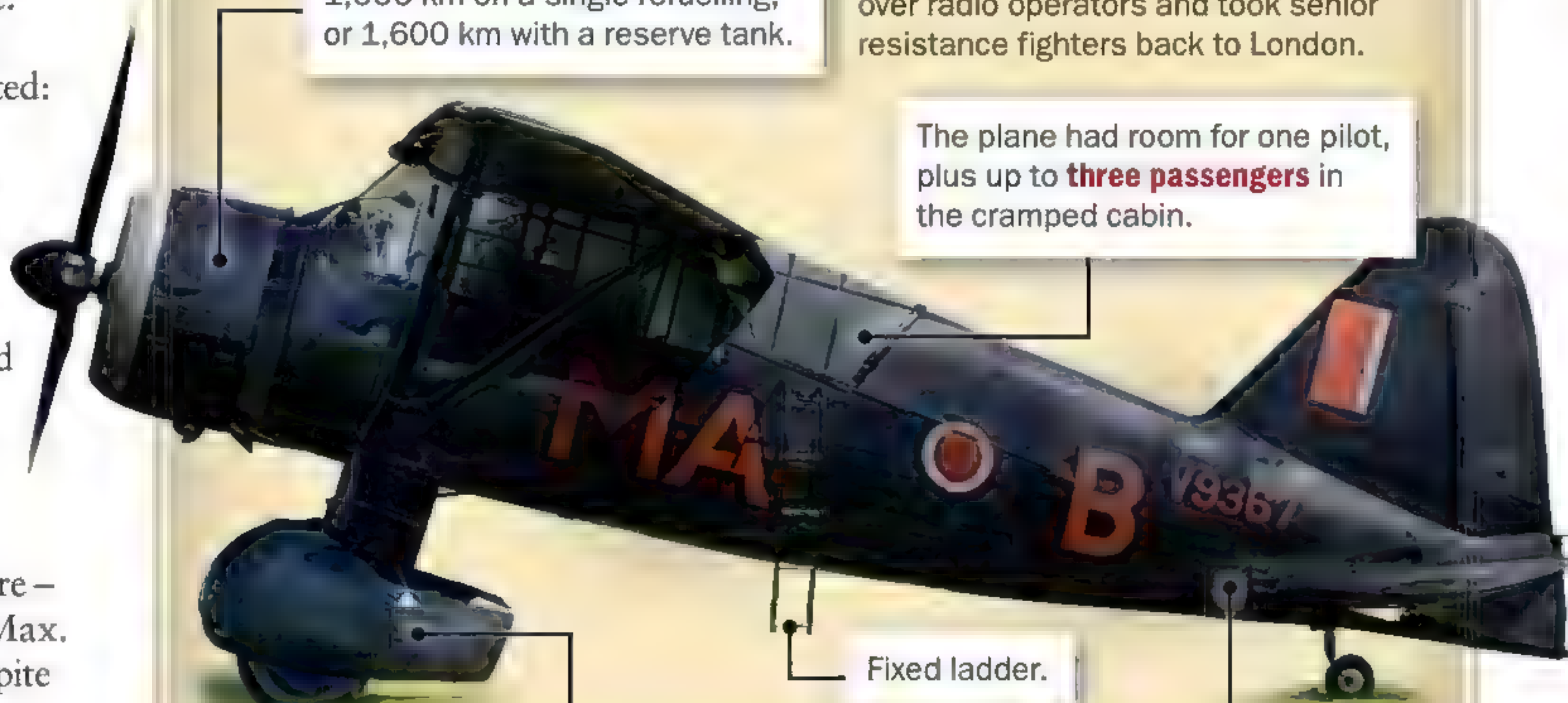
RAF's newly established transport division, the Special Duties Service.

The Westland Lysander proved to be perfect as a courier aircraft; it was robustly built, needed only a short, makeshift runway to get into the air, and because it was painted black, it was almost invisible at night.

The aircraft flew over a hundred missions to France, where it handed over radio operators and took senior resistance fighters back to London.

The **Westland Lysander** flew 1,000 km on a single refuelling, or 1,600 km with a reserve tank.

The plane had room for one pilot, plus up to **three passengers** in the cramped cabin.



Fixed ladder.

The landing gear was fitted with sturdy suspension, so the Lysander could handle **difficult landings** in bumpy French fields.

Matte black paint made the plane almost **invisible in the dark**.

established between the groups had to be re-established. In addition, their leader's martyrdom made the resistance fighters more anxious than ever – but they were to receive an unexpected gift from the occupying power.

The German war industry needed a new labour supply. A decree was made ordering all 18- to 20-year-old Frenchmen to work in Germany for two years. A total of 250,000 young men were affected, which on top of increasing German production would also threaten to slow the resistance movement's recruitment.

But the prospect of slave-like working conditions in Germany caused thousands of young Frenchmen to disappear underground – many chose to hide in the mountains, joining the resistance groups already there. The large influx of members meant that the resistance movement could begin to develop into a proper underground

army, known as the Maquis, after the dense thickets among which they hid.

A group led by the Communist Georges Guingouin carried out several spectacular operations, including sabotaging the Watelez rubber factory near Limoges, which produced around 20 tonnes of rubber a day for German army vehicles. Guingouin's people had 1.4 tonnes of explosives, which had been stolen from a mine, so they were well equipped for the task.

With four others, Guingouin cycled 50 kilometres with the explosives in backpacks to the factory, where they placed their devices. Six hours later, the factory exploded and was out of action for five months. The operation attracted more people, and the group grew from a handful of men to over a hundred.

Fierce battles in the Alps

As part of the preparations for the forthcoming D-Day, Allied planners >>>

Underground army emerged into the open

From 1943 to 1944, there was a marked shift in the way the French resistance movement operated as it began to fight quite openly.

In the first years of the occupation, the French resistance movement had primarily printed illegal magazines, undertaken intelligence work for the British and carried out minor, uncoordinated acts of sabotage.

From January 1943, more targeted resistance began when three large groups joined together as the MUR, which regarded General Charles de Gaulle in London as its leader. But the efforts to coordinate the struggle continued throughout the war, because the various groups had major political disagreements.

With increasing supplies of arms and explosives from the British SOE, it became possible to carry out more hard-hitting operations. And in the months leading up to D-Day, there were decisive developments: in secluded areas such as the French Alps, the resistance movement began to work like a real

guerrilla army, with armed – and often overt – attacks on the German occupying troops.

In areas where there were fewer Germans, the resistance groups even held parades to attract new members.

Where and when D-Day was to take place, the French resistance movement didn't know – even the leader, de Gaulle, was kept in the dark until 4th June 1944, when Winston Churchill briefed him. The various resistance groups were alerted via pre-agreed code words in the BBC's French broadcasts, so they could be prepared.

For the rest of 1944, the resistance movement actively participated in the liberation of the country. For instance, in Paris, in August, the freedom fighters struck behind German lines and liberated selected territories, which they tried to hold until the Allied forces arrived.

Every action against the German occupying forces required thorough preparation.

SABOTEURS LOOTED BANKS AND POST OFFICES

The struggle for freedom cost a lot. Every resistance fighter living underground received 1,500 francs a month for food and other necessities – the money came from Britain and various French foundations. But as the number of fighters increased, the available money didn't. Instead, the resistance had to raid banks and post offices. In the Cher district south of Paris, 107 post offices were robbed between June and September 1944.

In areas where the Germans were not present in large numbers, the resistance groups often appeared openly in their homemade uniforms.



wanted to know the true strength of the Maquis. In October 1943, the English SOE agent Yeo-Thomas visited a group at Cahors – and the agent was impressed by what he saw:

“These organised Maquis can, properly supported and armed, provide us with formidable and efficient support on D-Day,” he announced at home in London. And before long, the maquisards had the opportunity to show what they could do.

During 1943, they managed to eliminate all the German occupying troops from the rugged alpine region of Haute-Savoie, near the border with Switzerland. The development was a thorn in the side of the Vichy regime, which wanted to assert its authority in the area and show the Germans that the regime’s fascist militia, the Milice, could do more than just act as an auxiliary force for the Gestapo – the French fascists were ready for battle.

Vichy sent 2,000 militiamen to Haute-Savoie, led by French officer Joseph Darnand. The order was to wipe out the “terrorists”. But the plan was leaked, and on 2nd February, in its French evening broadcast, the BBC warned the resistance in the region:

“Attention the Maquis! Attention the Haute-Savoie! Calling the Haute-Savoie Maquis, SOS, SOS. The Oberführer Joseph Darnand has decided to launch a massive attack tomorrow, 3rd February, against the patriots hiding out in the mountains of the Haute-Savoie. There is not a minute to spare – you must take up your defensive positions.”

Around 600 maquisards were on the Glières plateau, at an altitude of 1,500 metres. They had retreated there to gather their forces, and now they were surrounded by militiamen. In the days that followed, the maquisards were able to withstand the militia’s onslaught, but they had few supplies, and began to starve and freeze. Without help, opposition to the militia would collapse.

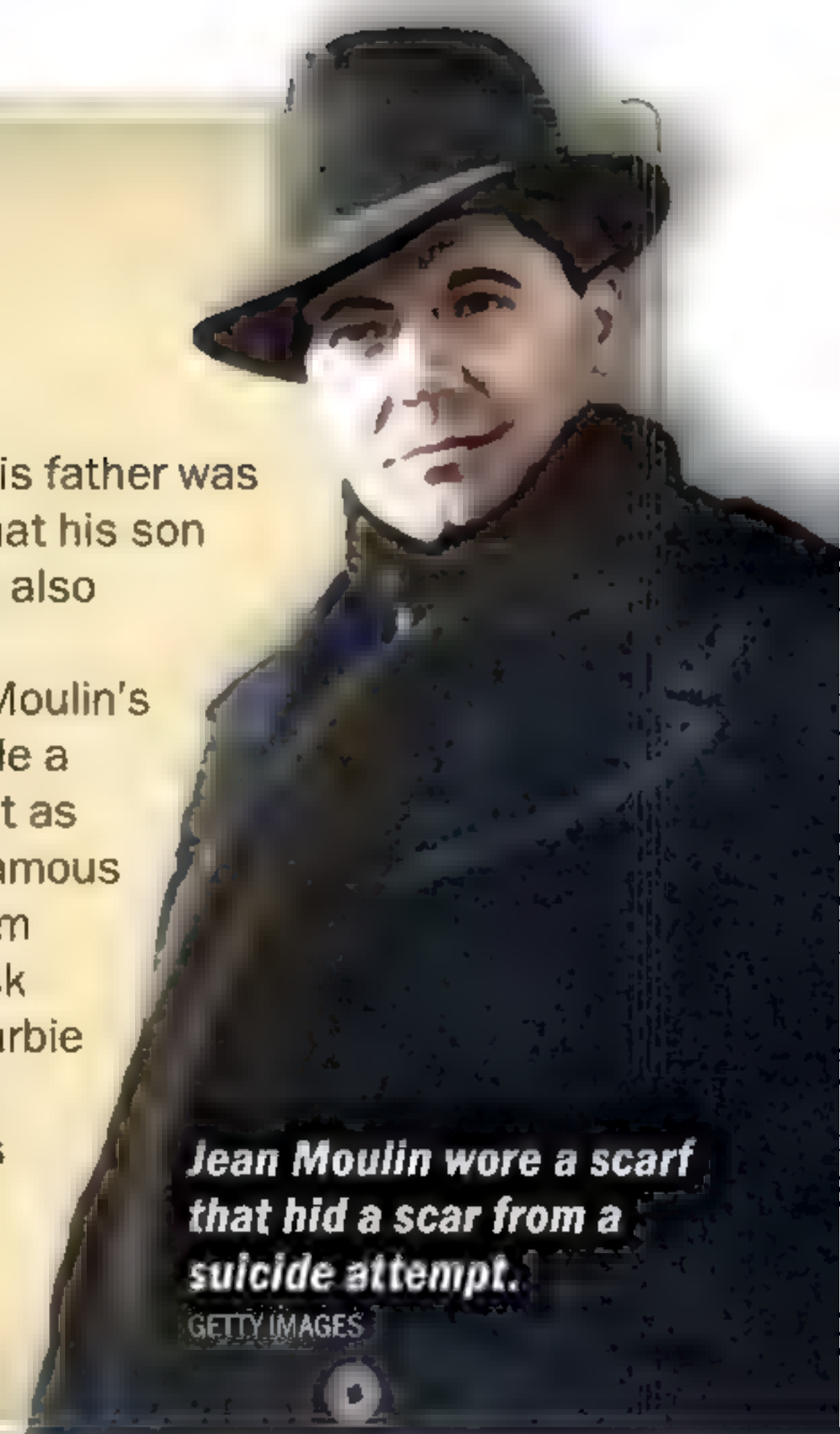
During the night of 13th February, four RAF planes

Resistance leader revealed nothing

Jean Moulin was born in 1899 in the south of France. His father was a schoolteacher and a fervent socialist – a conviction that his son adopted. Young Moulin studied law in Montpellier, while also producing drawings for a satirical magazine.

Nazi Germany’s occupation of France put an end to Moulin’s career as a civil servant. He went underground and made a great effort to unite the country’s resistance groups, but as early as 21st June 1943, he was arrested by Lyon’s infamous Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie, who personally tortured him for two weeks. The instruments laid out on Barbie’s desk included a whip, clubs and a blowtorch. At one point, Barbie placed a pencil and paper in front of the badly wounded Moulin, so he could write down the names of his friends in the resistance movement.

Instead, Moulin drew a caricature of his tormentor. He died shortly after without giving anyone away.



managed to drop 54 containers of weapons and warm clothing. A month later, another 50 tonnes of supplies arrived. Now the balance of power was reversed and the Milice had to withdraw. In their place, three German infantry battalions moved in with a total of 7,000 men, as well as support from the air force, the Luftwaffe.

Their superiority was too great; 300 maquisards escaped from the plateau, but 149 were killed. On the German side, the fighting cost 3,000 militiamen and German soldiers their lives.

The defeat hurt the resistance movement, but it was a moral victory, because the fighting had shown that the underground army could survive.

Fresh supplies from England

During a meeting in North Africa in January 1944, Winston Churchill discussed the role of the resistance movement during and after D-Day with representatives of the American forces. Churchill was granted his wish: the fighters would get more weapons.

The SOE intensified its drops, and over winter, the resistance movement was transformed. All around the country, up to 50,000 freedom fighters stood ready. The ever-increasing number meant that they couldn’t rely on the general population providing enough food – the SOE therefore also had to drop supplies for the freedom fighters. In the second quarter of 1943, 150 tonnes were dropped in 1,361

containers and a number of packages. The matte black containers with built-in parachutes were as long as an adult male and could hold 113 kilograms of weapons, explosives, ammunition and food. From January to March 1944, the amount dropped grew to 938 tonnes, with 2,689 tonnes from April to June.

In February, the French resistance groups finally merged into the FFI, *Forces françaises de l’intérieur*, lead by de Gaulle. As spring approached, the FFI and SOE decided to de-prioritise the sabotage of industrial plants and instead concentrate on disconnecting rail links, cutting telephone lines and blowing up bridges. The intention was to stop or delay German troop movements during an Allied invasion.

The resistance leaders devised detailed colour-coded sabotage plans, where each colour referred to a specific type of target, such as railways or telecommunications. The SOE had, for instance, selected 571 targets on the railway, and during the spring, the group dropped so-called Jedburgh units into France to manage the resistance movement’s actions during D-Day.

Each Jedburgh unit consisted of three soldiers: one British, one American and one French, assuring effective communication between the resistance fighters and the invading armies.

D-Day announced on the radio

The crucial day was approaching, and on the evening of 5th June, hundreds >>>

Village wiped out as revenge

The Germans' frustrations over French sabotage after D-Day led to the massacres of civilians.

On 9th June – three days after D-Day – SS soldiers from the Das Reich armoured division attacked the town of Tulle; 99 inhabitants were hanged in public.

The following day, SS soldiers attacked the village of Oradour-sur-Glane. The men were gathered in barns and shot in the leg, so they couldn't escape when the barns were set alight. The women and children were driven into a church and burned alive. A total of 642 died in Oradour.

The village has never been rebuilt, but its remains stand as a memorial.



After the massacre of 10th June 1944, time stands still in Oradour-sur-Glane.

of group leaders, such as cyclist Mercader, were waiting at their radios to hear the signal for the start of D-Day.

In 15 minutes, the BBC broadcast 200 coded messages. Now each group knew what to do. For example, in the town of Saint-Clair, near Caen in Normandy, a group of men had been ordered into action. Their task was part of the *Plan Vert* (Green Plan): they were to blow up the railway line between Caen and Laval, which was vital for the transportation of German troops to defend against the Allied landings.

The group's leader, Jean Renaud-Dandicolle, had parachuted in a few weeks earlier. He handed a pistol, some detonators and plastic explosive to each of the five men in the group – equipment that had been dropped from Allied planes a few nights before.

The men cycled to the small town of Grimposq and ventured towards an

embankment, beyond which lay an important railway junction. They placed explosives under four tracks, then retreated to a point of safety. The explosions shook the ground – and 50 metres of railway were gone.

That night, similar operations took place throughout Normandy. Within 24 hours, the railway network was affected by around a thousand acts of sabotage: locomotives were destroyed, trains derailed and bridges blown up, which in total reduced train traffic by 50 percent.

The railways were particularly important, because the Germans transported most of their troops and equipment by train. In addition, roads were blocked by felled trees, and important telephone cables were cut.

Allied advance raised hope

Sympathisers in the French postal and telegraph services helped indicate which

cables were used for communication between German units, and the line from the German-French headquarters in Paris to the High Command in Berlin was cut in several places.

The sabotage of telephone lines forced the Germans to communicate over radio, making it easier for British and American intelligence to intercept and decode their messages.

On 6th June, 22-year-old Michel Béchet from Gorron, near Rennes, knew that D-Day would be a success:

"The Allies have landed! The news began to circulate as early as this morning, but at first I could not believe it. For four years, we've been promised this day," he wrote in his diary.

The prospect of imminent liberation gave the resistance renewed strength, and enabled the movement to operate in the open. Thousands of men and women who had stayed at home out of

Road to freedom

The invasion took place at low tide, so the landing craft didn't trigger the mines on the beach

6th June 1944 Normandy landings

The Allied invasion begins on the night of 6th June, when paratroopers are dropped over Normandy to prepare for the Allied invasion. At dawn, thousands of Allied soldiers storm the beaches, pushing German troops back. The liberation of France is underway.

15th August Forgotten D-Day

In one day, 94,000 soldiers land at Marseille; 843 ships, 2,100 aircraft and 350 tanks take part in Operation Dragoon.

25th August The Germans abandon Paris

After nine days of general strikes and fighting in the streets of Paris, the Allies reach the city. The Germans quickly abandon their defence.

indifference or fear now came out of the shadows and wore the FFI armband; they would help liberate the country. Just after D-Day, the FFI had around 100,000 freedom fighters. And they were all needed, for the struggle was far from over.

As the Allied armies advanced through France, the resistance groups continued to operate behind German lines. German truck convoys were attacked, and sabotage of rail and telephone links continued.

The capital revolts

When the Allies carried out Operation Dragoon on 15th August 1944, which saw a new landing near Marseille, in the south of France, the German occupiers came under pressure from two sides, and the same day, the citizens of Paris launched a general strike.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler ordered that the city be razed to the ground before the enemy arrived. In order not to provoke the Germans, the American commander-in-chief, Dwight D Eisenhower, decided to let his forces bypass Paris and continue the offensive into Germany.

Meanwhile, the general strike in Paris developed into an uprising, with freedom fighters building barricades in the streets, and fighting in skirmishes with the Germans.

By this point, the Free French Forces were fighting alongside the Allies in France, but in light of the events in Paris, the soldiers feared that the city would suffer the same fate as Warsaw, where the Germans had brutally crushed an uprising by the city's inhabitants. The French soldiers

disobeyed their order and set course for the capital.

The forces arrived on the evening of 24th August, and the next day, the Germans surrendered. Charles de Gaulle hurried back to Paris and was able to take part in the victory parade.

The Allies' successful invasion of France would not have been possible without the French freedom fighters – but the effort cost dearly: in the first few days after D-Day, more than 3,000 French citizens perished, and it is estimated that the French resistance struggle cost a total of 100,000 civilian lives. ■

Postscript: Cyclist Guillaume Mercader received several honours after the war and became the leader of a professional cycling team.

The Vichy leader, Philippe Pétain, was convicted of treason after the war and spent the rest of his life in prison.

De Gaulle became France's leader until 1946, when he fell into disfavour as he demanded a new constitution with a strong president. From 1959-1969, he sat as elected president.

French freedom fighters helped Allied soldiers defeat the last pockets of resistance in Paris.

IMAGESELECT



16th December Setbacks in Ardennes

Hitler has assembled troops for a counter-offensive in the Ardennes. The Germans advance, but run out of fuel and give up on 8th January.

The day after Paris's liberation, de Gaulle took part in the victory parade.

IMAGESELECT

7th May 1945 Surrender in the west

The German army commander Alfred Jodl signs the declaration of surrender in Reims.

Jodl

Alfred Jodl signed the German declaration of surrender on 7th May.

2nd June 1946 Free elections

The French elect a new constitutional assembly. The winners are the Christian-democratic MRP, the Communists and the socialist SFIO party.

D-Day through Ge

The Germans had been waiting for months for the inevitable invasion. Along the Normandy beaches, young soldiers were crammed into small bunkers with woefully insufficient ammunition. And then finally, suddenly, Allied troops stormed towards them. The Germans emptied their machine guns and turned the beach into a bloodbath. But soon they realised there was no hope of victory and the fight had become about one thing only: surviving D-Day.

ANNET MACKIE/HBO & IMFDB.ORG



German eyes



By Troels Ussing

Heinrich Severloh was paralysed by the sight. For months, the German had sat and kept a close watch across the English Channel from his post on Normandy's windswept dunes. Now – at around 05.30 on 6th June 1944 – he saw what he'd been dreading: small, black dots appearing on the horizon. The 20-year-old corporal and his comrades in *Widerstandsnest 62* (Resistance Nest 62) could see that the long-awaited Allied invasion was minutes from starting, but the shock was that it would happen right here, where they were stationed. WN62 was one of just 14 such bunkers on Omaha Beach.

"The most powerful armada of all time – an endless line of gigantic battleships," Severloh recalled. At the time, the *gefreiter* (corporal) found himself mesmerised by the oncoming armada, his reverie finally interrupted by a distant humming sound.

"The noise grew ever louder, and as the huge bomber fleet flew straight for us in a ghostly fashion through an overcast, grey sky, the sound of the engines grew to a hellish thunder."

The first bomb landed just 50 metres behind the corporal's position, throwing earth and lumps of chalk into the air as he and his fellow Germans threw themselves to the ground or dived into their bunkers.

Not far from Severloh, Franz Gockel was in a trench. The 18-year-old private cowered in horror over his Polish machine gun. "Debris and clouds of smoke enveloped us," he later recalled. "The earth shook. Eyes and ears filled with dust. Sand ground between teeth."

The German blinked to see the ships were now close enough to shore to fire their deadly guns, which glowed orange and red around their barrels. Gockel felt a "wall of fire" as the salvo struck the German positions on land. To calm his nerves, the 18-year-old machine gunner began to pray, trying not to think about the overwhelming force coming towards him. But even as he prayed, he could hear his own voice inside his head: "I won't survive this, I won't survive this."

"Zone of death" had to prevent the invasion

By the end of 1943, Hitler and his generals were in no doubt that the Allies would attempt a landing on the continent the following year. The question was, where?

The German Atlantic Wall stretched along most of Europe's west coast, from »

Norway in the far north to the Bay of Biscay in the south. However, the defensive fortifications that – according to Nazi propaganda – had been built with “fanatical zeal” and were “impregnable” failed to live up to their billing. Erwin Rommel, who was given responsibility for overseeing the western coastal defences in November 1943, kicked the sand in frustration when he visited the positions along the coast. Yes, there were thousands of bunkers as well as coastal batteries and machine-gun positions, but there were many gaps along the line, too. The field marshal had swiftly set his men in motion.

Soldiers like Severloh and Gockel rolled up their sleeves alongside prisoners to dig holes into the sand and then fill them with poles, on top of which would be placed mines. At the same time, defensive barriers were shipped to the coast from occupied territories in Czechoslovakia and Belgium. Millions more mines were buried in the sand, while several trenches were built at least 500 metres from the water’s edge, stretching inland into what Rommel dubbed a “zone of death”.

“I believe we shall win the defensive battle in the west if we still have time to prepare,” wrote an optimistic Rommel to his wife in spring 1944. “I believe we can repulse the onslaught.”

The field marshal’s main problem was that the clock was ticking, and

fast. Everyone in German High Command believed the Allies would invade in early June. Roosevelt and Churchill enjoyed two key advantages over the defenders: massive numerical superiority and better-trained soldiers. A large proportion of the German defensive forces in the west comprised inexperienced privates or prisoners of war who’d escaped captivity by enlisting in the German Army.

“The most powerful armada – an endless line of battleships”

HEINRICH SEVERLOH, GERMAN CORPORAL, 1944

Yet the Germans’ biggest problem lay with the navy and the deplorable condition of the Luftwaffe on the Western Front, meaning they lacked warships, submarines and aircraft. Hitler and Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels chose, as usual, to ignore the gloomy prospects.

“We are ready! If the enemy comes, our soldiers will teach him a lesson,” thundered Goebbels just days before the invasion. The Führer also oozed

confidence when he sent a message to the troops in France:

“I know, my heroic soldiers, that each one of you is filled with the will to fight for a fortunate future for our people in the next few days – and ultimately to secure it. Wherever the enemy attacks, he must be destroyed. He will not succeed in gaining a foothold on a coast defended by us. Victory will therefore be ours!”

The two senior Nazis would be proven badly wrong.

Bombs began to fall

Hitler’s and Goebbels’s words were furthest from the minds of Severloh, Gockel and their comrades on Omaha Beach, where more than 10,000 rockets and shells rained down on them in the space of just 30 minutes.

Gefreiter Gustav Winter was sitting in a bunker one kilometre from Severloh and Gockel’s positions and felt the Allied bombing, too. Together with his 17-year-old Czech gun loader, Winter was responsible for halting any enemy troops from his “concrete panzer” at WN 68, which was situated on one of the lowest cliffs at Omaha.

“When one of the naval shells exploded near us, the shock wave came through the ground and travelled through the panzer, which felt like a punch in the stomach. These blows came again and again, every time a kick in the belly, and making my ears ring horribly,” Winter recalled. Meanwhile, the Czech loader lay on the floor, sobbing.

At 06.15, the men in WN 62 could see through the smoke that hundreds of landing craft were cutting their way through the 1.5-metre-high waves close to shore. Severloh sprinted to the neighbouring communications bunker.

“Now it’s starting! They’re landing!” he shouted loudly, before zigzagging back to his own bunker, where one of his fellow soldiers awaited.

Severloh made sure that his heavy MG42 machine gun was firmly affixed to its support legs, while his comrade fed the deadly weapon a cartridge belt of 7.92-mm Mauser bullets.

“Lambs to a slaughter”

His heart pounding, Severloh watched as the enemy’s landing craft vessels (LCVs) approached the shore like ants crawling up and down the waves. The



The Allies had to cross 500 metres of open beach. As they did so, they were subjected to fierce fire, which included the MG42 machine gun firing 1,200 rounds per minute.

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corporal and his countrymen were surprised that the Allies were attacking at low tide. It meant the landing craft avoided colliding with the German mined poles and iron gates, but as a consequence, the US forces would have to plot a deadly 300-metre-long route across the unprotected beach until they could find cover under a dyke.

At 06.30, the first bow ramps in the Higgins boats were lowered, and the soldiers jumped out, surprisingly calm. In some places, the water was still so deep that GIs sank under the water, after which they were forced to half-swim, half-wade into formed columns, as if they were undertaking an exercise. The Germans along the coast were yet to open fire. They had been ordered not to shoot until the Marines were around 400 metres away, in water up to their knees.

"The Americans struggled forward with their weapons and packs through the high surf of the cold sea, slowly and utterly unprotected. We were well aware that the GIs below us were being led like lambs to a slaughter," Severloh said later.

The corporal had a perfect view of the beach from his small bunker 25 metres up on the clifftop. Severloh's finger itched, impatient to squeeze the MG42's cold metal trigger. The gun, with a firing rate of 1,200 rounds per minute, had been nicknamed *Hitlersäge* ('Hitler's buzzsaw').

"Poor swine," muttered Severloh's superior, Oberleutnant Bernhard Frerking, as the enemy approached the 400-metre mark.

Shortly afterwards, the call to arms rang across all the bunkers and machine-gun positions along the shore at Omaha Beach: "*Los!* (Open fire!)" It was time to slaughter the enemy.

Omaha was bathed in blood

Suddenly, the heavy machine guns, mortars and field guns unleashed an inferno on the beach, where the defenceless US troops were ripped to pieces. Severed arms and legs flew into the air as a result of the Germans' powerful weapons, as landing craft splintered into pieces of metal and wood that flew through the air like arrows. Severloh also swung his machine gun from side to side:

"I could clearly see the water shoot up where my machine-gun bullets hit,"



Around 3,175 tonnes of bombs were dropped by Allied bombers during D-Day.

Germans were behind from the first shot

In almost all respects, the Germans were inferior on D-Day. In particular, the enemy's air superiority made defending the coast a hopeless task.

An enormous invasion force comprising 156,000 landing troops sailed towards the shores of Normandy early in the morning of 6th June 1944.

The Allies were able to land three times as many soldiers as the German defensive forces. The Germans may have had the advantage of their position, forcing the enemy to fight its way ashore along a coast where thousands of field guns and artillery stood ready, but when 6,939 ships – including large warships with guns as powerful as those possessed by the Germans – stood against them, it felt little more than a consolation prize.

The Germans' limited supply of shells and machine-gun bullets made the situation almost hopeless, for the Allies carried almost 450,000 tonnes of ammunition. It meant they could not hope to keep the enemy at bay in the

long term. The Allies would not need to worry about running out of ammo.

The biggest disadvantage faced by the defenders, however, was the fact the Allies enjoyed complete supremacy in the air. The invaders carpet-bombed the coast and hinterland without any stiff resistance, for the Luftwaffe had virtually no aircraft available on the Western Front during the invasion.

D-DAY STATS		
SOLDIERS	50,350	156,000
PLANES	327	11,590
WARSHIPS	105	1,213
ARTILLERY	3,200	4,800
TANKS	1,400	?
LOSSES (dead & wounded)	4-9,000	8,843 (including 4,000 paratroopers)

he wrote. "When the small fountains approached the GIs, they threw themselves down. After just a few minutes, panic broke out."

The corporal watched as US troops desperately crawled towards the beach's defences of wide iron gates and angled irons – known as 'Belgian gates' and 'Czech hedgehogs' respectively – to find some cover. At the same time, new boats continued to deliver streams of new soldiers – 30 from each LCV – to the beach.

"As the boats approached, I concentrated on the ramps. As soon as they came down for the GIs to jump out, I began to fire... I sometimes used my carbine, since I could fire aimed shots at individual soldiers [and] give

my machine gun a chance to cool down," Severloh recounted.

Later, the man dubbed the 'Beast of Omaha' admitted: "I do not know how many men I shot. It was awful. Thinking about it makes me want to throw up. I almost emptied an entire >>>

infantry landing craft. The sea was red around it."

Not far from Seveloh's bunker, Franz Gockel also sat with his finger glued to the trigger of his Polish machine gun. The 18-year-old had recovered from the shock of the initial bombardment to take on the role of executioner. On the rare occasions when he stopped firing to allow the gun to cool down, Gockel was able to form an overview of the unfolding massacre.

"So many bodies lay on the beach. And new men just kept coming. We couldn't understand it."

The constant flow of new troops was down to the fact the Allies had enormous resources. In addition to soldiers, amphibious tanks and armoured bulldozers rolled on to the beach during the early part of the invasion, sending up cascades of water and sand while US troops took cover behind them.

As the clock passed 10.30, thousands of marines had reached cover behind the beach's seawall. Severloh and Glockel watched as enemy troops – supported by destroyers and Sherman tanks – stormed the German minefield and approached the bottom of the cliffs. At the same time, both Germans could see their ammunition stores were dwindling. Fear now struck in earnest.

Corporal was paralysed by the horrors

Gefreiter Winter and his Czech aide saw their first serious action when they heard the engine of a Sherman tank trying to battle its way forward. Through his gun's target, Winter spied his countrymen fleeing from one of the dunes. As he followed their progress, they were caught in a blast from a shell, blown into fragments of flesh and bone.

"I dreaded the thought of dying like that," Winter recalled. Seconds later, a cloud of sand cleared to reveal a US tank crawling its way up the dune.

"This was a great shock to me, as I didn't think it was possible for the attackers to come off the beach, but I fired on that panzer immediately. It was a Sherman class panzer, which was very high in profile, and made an easy target – especially with the big, white star they

had painted on the front," he said. To his amazement, his shell bounced off the tank's armour, exploding behind it.

The US tank responded with a machine-gun salvo, which ripped through his gunsight before it fired a shell that destroyed Winter's turret and hit the Czech loader full in the chest. The impact killed Winter's assistant but

slowed the shell enough to prevent it bouncing back off the wall to hit Winter.

"So this poor boy, who barely needed to shave his chin, saved my life in that way. He died instantly, standing next to me. That was the end of the concrete panzer as far as I was concerned."

The former panzer corporal knew it was time to leave as he spied several

Hitler's wall worked best at high tide

There's a difference of 300 metres in the length of Normandy's beaches between low and high tides. The Germans had based their defences at Omaha Beach on the belief the Allies would attack at high tide, when they'd only have to advance across 200 metres of exposed sandy beach. But the Allies arrived instead at low tide, neutralising several of the German traps.

THE MAGAZINE / THE NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM, WIKIA & BARCH 1011-299-1825-06A

The Allies landed at five different locations on D-Day, but the fighting on **OMAHA BEACH** was the fiercest.

The German **TANKS** in the hinterland couldn't reach the beaches due to enemy planes and paratroopers.

Many German soldiers at Omaha were veterans from the Eastern Front.

tanks and marines pouring over the sand dunes. One US soldier was carrying a flamethrower, which he directed at a German anti-tank position around 100 metres from Winter's own bunker. With great force, a burst of fire engulfed the gun and those manning it.

Winter witnessed this after sneaking out of his turret's side hatch to drop

down behind the concrete structure. To his horror, he saw the dunes he knew so well filled with huge craters and body parts, as smoke and dust swirled around everywhere.

"It was absolute hell on that sand. Absolute hell," he recalled.

Gefreiter Winter cowered behind the turret. He sat and watched as GIs ran

past his position. Only the thirteenth to pass spotted the German, instinctively striking Winter's face with his rifle butt: "He had a bayonet fixed on it, and he was going to stab me with it, I think," explained Winter, "but an explosion close by diverted his attention."

While the enemy continued to flood past, Winter noted many were still in >>>

The ideal invasion

The German defence at Omaha Beach had been set up for an attack at high tide, as shown here:

Belgian gates stopped enemy vessels

The large metal gates, which the Germans stole during the invasion of Belgium, were 3 x 2 metres in size, and weighed 1,280 kg. They were designed to stop the enemy's boats as they sailed into them.

Mines would blow Allies into the air

Wooden poles, called Rommel's asparagus, as well as ramped beams with mines on were positioned so they could blow holes in the bottom of incoming landing craft and sink them.

Hedgehogs stopped tanks and LCVs

The 1.5-metre-high Czech hedgehogs were angled beams of iron and were one of the few defences that also worked at low tide. They could block both landing craft and tanks.

Landing was problematic

A dyke marked the high-water mark. It consisted of a stone wall and a long row of piles of barbed wire, which the enemy had to break through using explosive charges known as Bangalore torpedoes.

Sand hid dangers

The last 200 metres of beach were filled with buried mines, barbed wire fences and a cliff 50 metres high that the enemy would have to scale - all while being shot at by German machine gunners.

Bunkers covered all roads inland

Fourteen large bunker facilities with field guns, mortars and machine guns lay along Omaha Beach. They were strategically positioned to cover all roads away from the beach.

Had the Allies attacked at high tide, their boats would have slid up the ramped beam and hit the mine.

wet clothes as they worked to secure a path away from the beachhead. Suddenly, another US soldier grabbed Winter, pointed towards the beach, and kicked the German in the backside to send him on his way down the cliff.

The corporal was met at the foot of the hill by other invasion troops, who handcuffed him and placed him with other German prisoners. He took in the view of the beach, moving from the shoreline where dead US troops had washed ashore, to the bottom of the cliffs where charred remains of German corpses had fallen from their defence posts. Winter would never forget it:

"It was a sight that would make the bravest man very mournful... We

German prisoners were all mute, just looking at this."

Germans fled the beach

By 13.00, the Allies had landed over 19,000 US troops – and bulldozers hummed around clearing away obstacles to allow the tanks to advance forward. As the enemy invaded the easternmost part of Omaha, where Winter's bunker had been located, Gockel still sat in his small bunker a kilometre away.

The 18-year-old's machine gun had been destroyed by a shell, so he was now firing with his Karabiner 98k rifle. Attempting to return to his position after scavenging food from his troop bunker, he was shot through his left

hand – looking down at it, he "saw three fingers hanging loose by torn tendons".

"That's a ticket home for you," the soldier who administered first aid on the hand said enviously of the so-called *Heimatschuss* (home shot).

His wound bandaged, the young soldier was given permission to leave the front. He avoided the area's major roads, afraid US troops would follow the same route, and instead snuck along small paths until he found an ambulance carrying other wounded men.

As it rumbled along the road towards an aid station in Balleroy, 15 km from the coast, Gockel peered out from the tarpaulin hole in the rear and saw how the landscape had been bombed by

The battery at Longues-sur-Mer, located near Omaha Beach, had four 152-mm naval guns that shelled enemy ships during the Invasion.

Huge concrete bunkers bound the Atlantic Wall together

Along Europe's west coast, the Germans had built *Widerstandsnesten* – resistance nests. These were large bunkers with powerful field guns surrounded by smaller bunkers and trenches.

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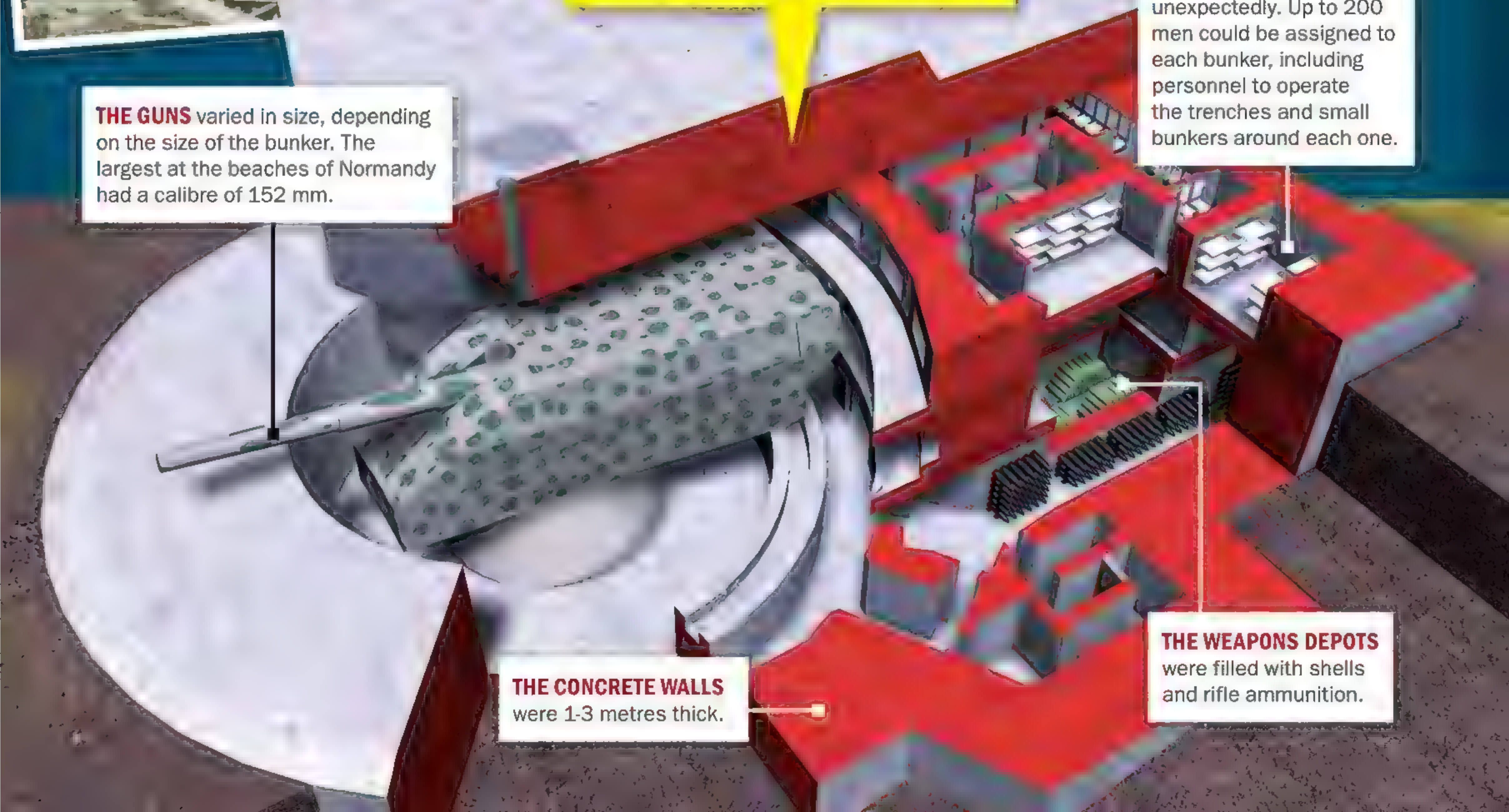
It took a total of seven men to operate one of the Germans' large **152-mm naval guns**. One or two men were engaged supplying the bunker's various units with **shells** or **machine-gun ammunition**.

THE GUNS varied in size, depending on the size of the bunker. The largest at the beaches of Normandy had a calibre of 152 mm.

SLEEPING QUARTERS were inside the bunker, so the *Widerstandsnest* was always manned if the enemy appeared unexpectedly. Up to 200 men could be assigned to each bunker, including personnel to operate the trenches and small bunkers around each one.

THE CONCRETE WALLS were 1-3 metres thick.

THE WEAPONS DEPOTS were filled with shells and rifle ammunition.



Allied planes: “Dead cattle lay in the pastures [and] the supply units had also suffered their share of casualties.”

Several times the ambulance was forced to stop because burnt-out German trucks blocked the way, as dead and dying compatriots lay in the ditches on the side of the road. Gockel was shocked at the destruction, but the 18-year-old found solace in the thought that he’d soon return to Germany.

The fatherland felt much further away to Heinrich Severloh, who by 14.30 had exhausted all his ammunition. Instead, he fed the MG42 with tracer bullets. They were as effective as ordinary bullets, but lit up the German’s position every time he squeezed the trigger.

In the space of 10 minutes, Severloh had been flung from his weapon four times by powerful shells that exploded near the bunker, filling the German’s lungs with smoke. The explosions left his ears ringing. Disorientated and barely able to hear what was going on around him, Severloh and his comrades in the bunker knew that this was their last chance to get away.

The Germans ran bent double from the brief shelter of one shell crater to the next. For several minutes, Severloh waited behind a hideout for his fellow soldiers from the bunker, but only one showed up breathless – the others had been gunned down by enemy bullets, including Severloh’s close friend Lieutenant Bernhard Frerking.

Although every muscle in his body ached, and blood ran from a wound in his face, Severloh and his comrade knew they had to flee immediately. Several times on their five-kilometre flight to battalion headquarters in the village of Colleville, they were forced to change course to avoid running into advanced US units. Exhausted, they finally tumbled into the headquarters, where a nurse treated Severloh’s facial wounds. Amid all the discouraging news, the corporal had one sliver of hope to cling on to as he overheard a conversation between two officers.

“We’re waiting for the tanks,” said one. “Then we’ll kick those Americans out again.”

Allies took hold

No one in the headquarters was aware of just how serious the situation was



The Allies built temporary ports – Mulberry harbours – to land troops and supplies after D-Day.

– because the panzer units they were relying on to repel the offensive during the afternoon were faring just as badly. In many places, Allied paratroopers had gained control of bridges and roads into the surrounding countryside, while enemy aircraft and the naval armada destroyed those tanks able to approach the coast.

***“We’re waiting
for the tanks.
Then we’ll kick
those Americans
out again”***

GERMAN OFFICER, 1944

It was with good reason that the Germans lost heart during “The Longest Day”, as Erwin Rommel would christen 6th June 1944. The Allies successfully established bridgeheads along all five landing beaches, and in some cases these extended up to eight kilometres inland. In the evening, a German chief-of-staff responded to Rommel’s demand for a situation report by estimating that the enemy was landing one tank per minute. Deep down, Rommel and his generals knew the enemy had secured a firm hold on


the French coast. The Atlantic Wall had failed to keep them out.

Colleville would also be taken before the end of 6th June. Along with several countrymen, Severloh managed to sneak out of the village before the Sherman tanks rolled in. In the dark, they stumbled south in the hopes of meeting friendly forces, but after just a few kilometres found themselves pinned down by fire from heavy machine guns, forcing the group to seek a hiding place in the low-lying terrain.

“We had to concede that the war had already moved behind us and now we were a small, lost group, with few weapons and few prospects, surrounded by enemies and were lying in a damp hollow somewhere at the end of the world,” Severloh wrote later.

As the night wore on, Severloh sank into despair: “Was the whole struggle, the personal sacrifice, the enormous use of physical and mental strength, the fear, the pain and the terrible killing all for nothing? I thought of Frerking and felt tears well up in my eyes and run warmly down my swollen face. Now it was all over.”

As light dawned the following morning, Severloh and his comrades stood up. Unarmed, hands in the air, they stepped through the dense undergrowth and into a nearby field, where US troops stood waiting for them. Exactly 24 hours after the invasion had begun, the war – for Severloh – was over.



On the steep slopes of Monte Cassino, German paratroopers gave the Allies a battle they'd never forget.

GETTY IMAGES

Elite German troops refused to give up

The Allies had twice tried in vain to capture Monte Cassino in Italy, so in March 1944, they made every effort to finally dispatch the German paratroopers defending the position. The attack was triggered by as many as 800 bombers and nearly 1,000 guns that pulverised everything in their sight. But the elite German soldiers refused to be defeated.



By Niels-Peter Granzow Busch

The German troops could hear the aircraft long before they could see them. The droning of countless Allied bombers filled the gorges of the mountains and echoed over the landscape around the monastery of Monte Cassino, 120 kilometres south-east of Rome.

It was 08.30 on the morning of 15th March 1944. From his position in the town of Cassino, several hundred metres below the monastery, Lieutenant Schuster and the soldiers of Germany's 1st Parachute Division could clearly see the first bombers approaching. In foxholes, they held their breath as they waited for the bombs to fall. Three at a time, the largest force of bombers ever assembled in the Mediterranean dropped its deadly load on the town and its dogged defenders.

Then the artillery took over. For hours, bombs and shells rained down and pulverised buildings, walls and the living into dust.

"Breathing became a desperate and urgent business. At all costs we had to avoid being suffocated, buried alive," Schuster wrote afterwards.

As the dust settled, Allied tanks and infantry moved into the ruins of the bombed town. They'd tried to capture Monte Cassino twice before, and this time they were convinced they'd won the battle. They assumed that no one could survive such intense shelling. Fearlessly, the soldiers clambered over the piles of rubble and twisted metal.

Suddenly, the ferocious sound of machine guns rang out, and seconds later, an anti-tank shell drilled its way through the steel of the leading tank. In the hours that followed, it became embarrassingly clear to everyone that Monte Cassino's defenders were far from beaten.

The third battle of Monte Cassino would be the bitterest. Against all odds and hopelessly outnumbered, German paratroopers managed to hold their position. Even their opponents called them "the best soldiers in the world".

Italy betrayed Hitler

The third battle of Monte Cassino was the culmination of an almost seven-month Allied campaign across Italy – a campaign that Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, had predicted would only take a few weeks. On 2nd October 1943, he'd written in a telegram to Field Marshal Harold Alexander, commander of the

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Allied forces in Italy, that by the end of the month “we shall meet in Rome”. He had, however, catastrophically underestimated the capability of the German forces. Only after nine months of fighting, the most brutal of which took place at Monte Cassino, did the Allies enter the Eternal City.

The struggle for Italy was precipitated by the Italians themselves, when dictator Mussolini was ousted and arrested in July 1943, after which the new government secretly began negotiations with the Allies.

When the Allies announced the surrender of Italy on 8th September, the Germans responded defiantly. German troops occupied the capital, Rome, and forces were sent towards southern Italy.

The Allies had captured Sicily in August, and the day after the surrender of Italy, Allied troops landed on the coast of Salerno, 50 kilometres south of Naples. Here, they were attacked by German troops, who quickly had to retreat, because the Allies were able to deploy their superior forces of warships and aircraft – after four years of war, the Germans had almost none left.

However, the German commander-in-chief in Italy, Field Marshal Kesselring, had a plan. Southern Italy

was too difficult to defend, so instead he set out to delay the Allied advance long enough for the Germans to establish a line of defence further north.

Approximately 120 kilometres south-east of Rome are two mountain ranges – the Aurunci Mountains in the west and the mighty Apennines in the east – which largely cut Italy in two from coast to coast. It was here that German engineering troops built the so-called Gustav Line to hold back the enemy. The only place the Allies could cross the line with their tanks was through the Liri Valley, but that required troops to cross the mountains at the town of Cassino.

The most important mountain was the 516-metre Monte Cassino, from where the Germans could monitor every Allied movement and attack their tanks with artillery. So, Hitler ordered Monte Cassino to be held at any cost.

Allies ran headlong into a wall

Field Marshal Kesselring’s plan worked beyond all expectations. Determined German resistance and unusually bad weather hampered the Allies’ advance so much that they didn’t reach the Gustav Line’s advanced positions until mid-November 1943. Even Winston Churchill had to admit that his original dream was completely shattered:

“There is no prospect of Rome being taken in 1943.”

The coming months, however, would make the British prime minister far more frustrated. In the second half of January 1944, the Allies made their first attempt to break through the defences at Monte Cassino. US and French Algerian troops led the attack on the Germans, who had fortified the town of Cassino along with the hills behind it.

Shortly after, the Allies landed approximately 50,000 troops at Anzio, 50 kilometres north of Cassino. The hope was that the invasion would force Kesselring to weaken the defence of Monte Cassino by diverting troops away to counter the new threat to the north. But the invasion force spent so much time securing its position that Kesselring managed to send forces from other parts of Italy instead.

The German defences at Monte Cassino, therefore,

remained intact. To reach Cassino, the Americans first had to cross the Rapido River, which German engineering troops had turned into a deathtrap by laying mines on the banks and the surrounding terrain. The result was a bloodbath. The fighting raged for about three weeks before the attackers had to give up. The first battle of Cassino cost the Allies about 2,500 lives. But the Germans also suffered heavy losses, and the soldiers were shaken.

“The stagnation of the campaign on the Italian front is becoming scandalous!”

PRIME MINISTER WINSTON CHURCHILL.

“Not a single man of my original squad is left. It seems to be the same in the entire company,” one soldier wrote in a letter home to his father.

The Allies, unlike the Germans, had access to unlimited fresh troops, so the lost US soldiers were replaced with units from places such as India and New Zealand. The new forces had fought against the Germans in North Africa and were some of the Allies’ best troops. Now they were to crush the German defences at Cassino.

Allies destroyed the monastery

The second battle of Monte Cassino began on 15th February, a few days after the previous one ended. To the astonishment of the German defenders, the Allies began the attack by dropping 1,400 tonnes of bombs on the medieval monastery on top of Monte Cassino.

The attack that destroyed the magnificent monastery was pointless, however, because out of respect for the history of the building, Kesselring had forbidden his forces to use it. Instead, the bombing killed around 250 Italian civilians from Cassino who had sought refuge inside the monastery.

Although no German troops were in the monastery itself, several of their



Field Marshal Kesselring, nicknamed “Smiling Albert”, led the German forces in Italy.

IMAGESELECT

positions on the mountain were hit, resulting in heavy losses. However, the Allies hadn't properly co-ordinated the bombing with the infantry, so the troops didn't attack until the day after the bombs fell. And by then the Germans were ready. The fighting raged for three days before the Allies had to call off the attack. Once again, this angered Winston Churchill, who'd already despaired that: "The stagnation of the whole campaign on the Italian front is becoming scandalous!"

On the German side, conversely, satisfaction was high. However, Field Marshal Kesselring knew that it was only a matter of time before the Allies would attack again – and probably with even greater force. He therefore let German paratroopers take over the defence of both the town of Cassino and the mountain. Now that the monastery on the mountaintop lay in ruins, its rubble was used to hide the German positions.

The paratroopers belonged to the absolute elite of the German Army and had proven their fighting power in the attack on the Belgian fortress Eben-Emael in 1940 and the capture of Crete in 1941. In Italy, the troops had been fighting non-stop since the Allied landing in Salerno, four and a half months earlier. The fighting had decimated their numbers, and they were dying of exhaustion. But the soldiers knew their new mission was crucial. With little more than small arms and a few guns, they set about preparing for the coming attack.

Cassino was carpet-bombed

Heading up the Allies' new plan of attack was General Bernard Freyberg, who'd fought against the German paratroopers in Crete three years earlier – and lost. Possibly it was the general's bitter experience in Crete that led him to decide that the next attack on Monte Cassino would begin with one of the most violent bombings of the war. Only when every square metre of the German defences had been bombed and every last defender wiped out would his experienced troops from India and New Zealand be deployed.

On the morning of 15th March 1944, the German troops at Monte Cassino realised what was in store



German soldiers quickly defeated the Italian Army and disarmed it.

RITZ/USCANPIX

Germany's back door was kicked in

When the Italians invited the Allies to invade Italy, Hitler had to act quickly so that Germany wasn't attacked from the south.

In fact, neither the Allies nor the Germans had thought they would fight over Italy. In 1943, the Allies had long since decided that they would invade the German-occupied territories across the English Channel. When it became clear that the Axis Powers would lose the war, however, the Italians overthrew dictator Mussolini and secretly offered the Allies the chance to land troops in southern Italy.

When Hitler heard of the plan, he ordered the German Army units in Italy into action. In a lightning operation, the

Germans occupied Rome and disarmed the Italian army. By that time, Allied troops had already landed in southern Italy.

German High Command worried that Allied troops would reach Rome, as from there, the Allies would be able to send planes over southern Germany and bomb the region's many factories and industries that had hitherto been safe.

The Germans' strategy was to hold the Allies back until engineering troops had fortified a line of defence in the mountains south of Rome – the Gustav Line.

Line of defence to stop the Allies



SHUTTERSTOCK/HISTORIE

Monte Cassino became a mountain of death

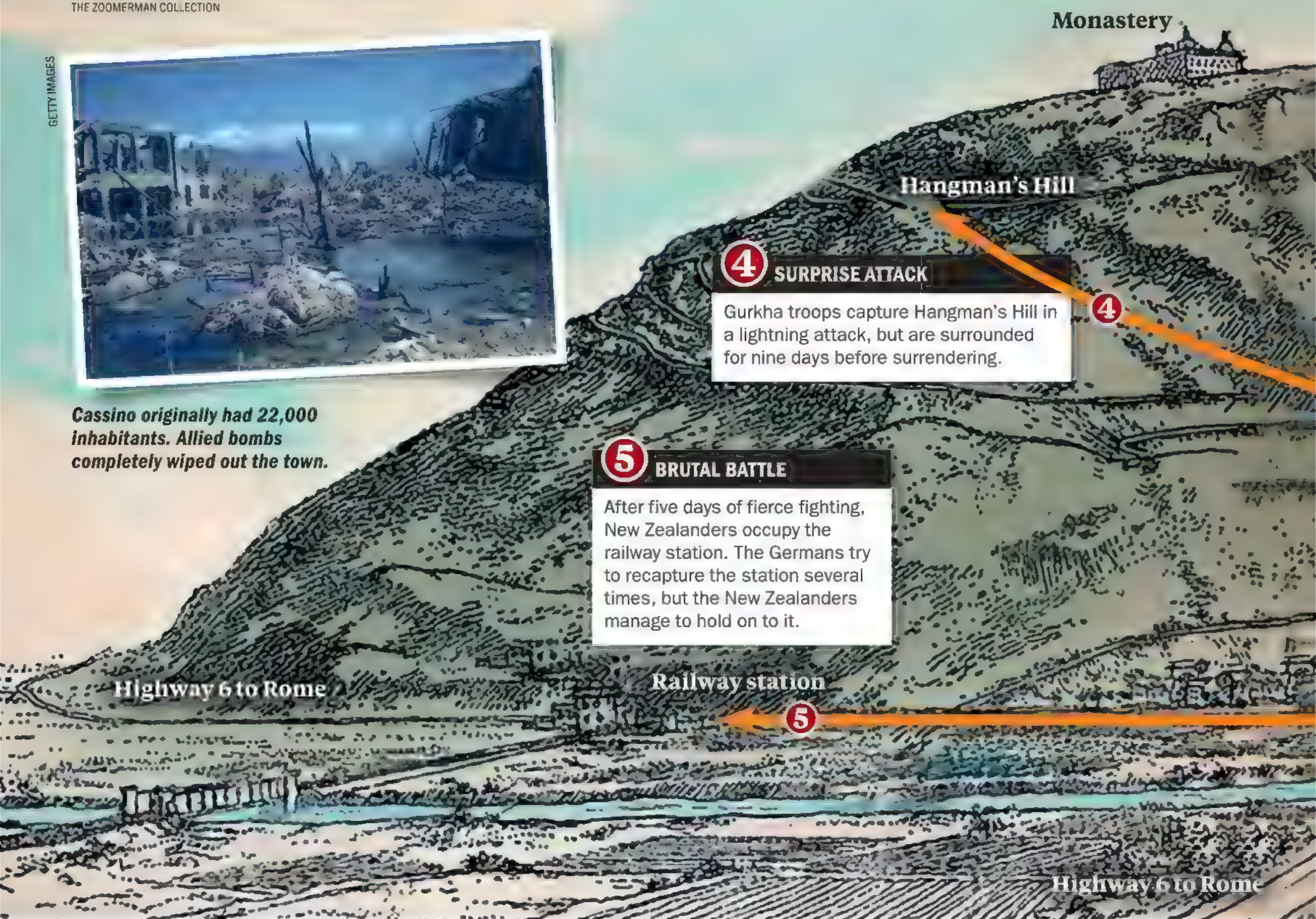
The Allies hoped that they could annihilate the defenders with enormous bomb attacks in the third battle of Monte Cassino. However, the paratroopers survived and exploited the ruins to create a deathtrap.

THE ZOOMERMAN COLLECTION

GETTY IMAGES



Cassino originally had 22,000 inhabitants. Allied bombs completely wiped out the town.



when the first of a total of 775 bombers appeared. Shortly after, the first of several thousand bombs fell.

"The whining scream of their approach, the roar of their explosions and the noise of the aircraft themselves mingled with echoes that were flung back from the hills to produce an indescribable and infernal bedlam of noise," said Lieutenant Schuster, who, along with around 300 other paratroopers, was in Cassino town.

The planes attacked in waves, at 10-minute intervals. According to soldier Georg Schmitz, who'd sought refuge with his comrades in a basement near Cassino train station, each

bombing felt as though a giant was shaking the town: "This was terrible. We were buried alive. Frantically we started to claw in a mad, haphazard way at dirt and stones. And then there was another wave just overhead."

For another soldier, the bombing felt like the end of the world:

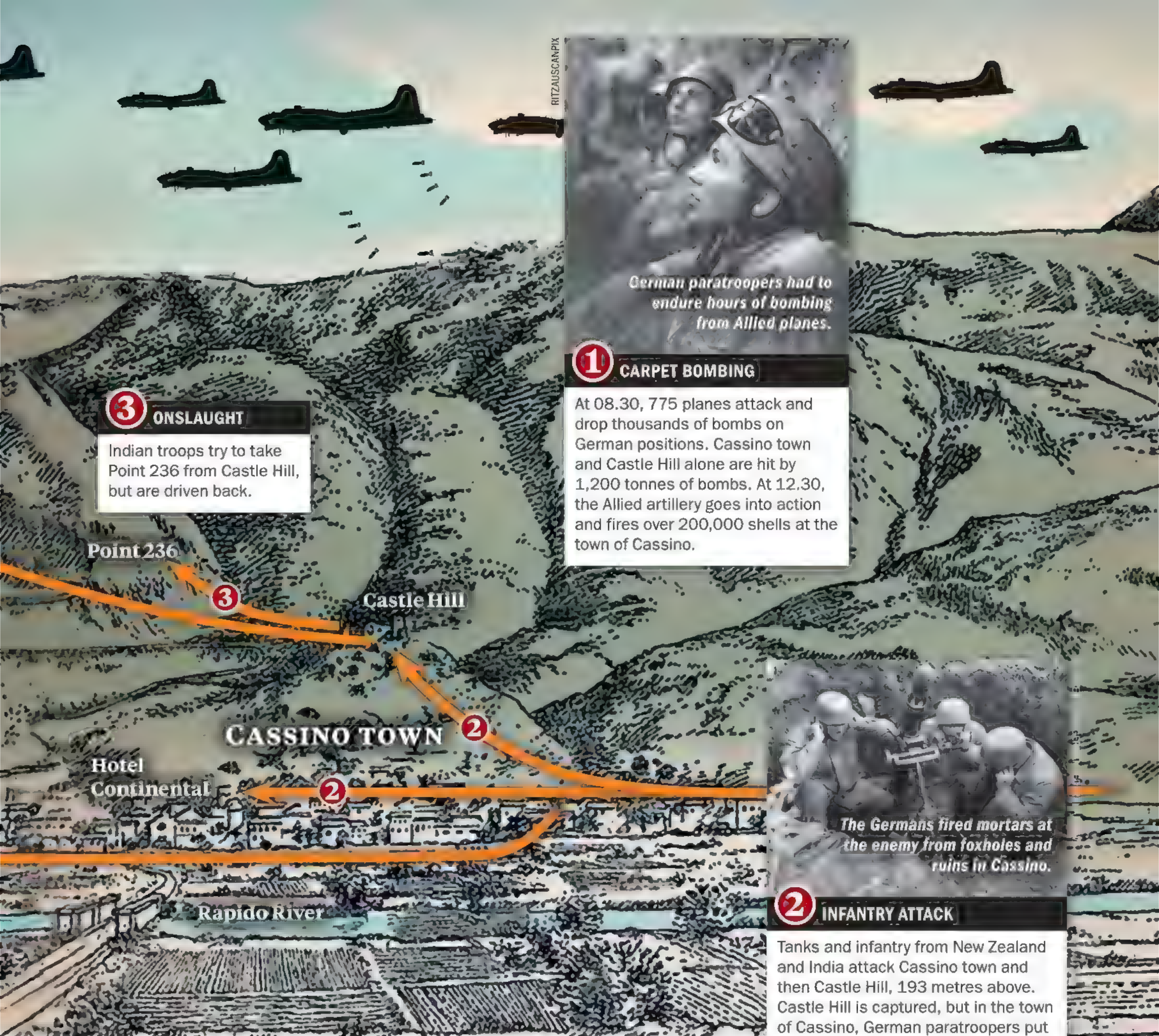
"Comrades were wounded, buried alive, dug out again, eventually buried for the second time. ... Scattered survivors, half crazy from the explosions, reeled about in a daze, avoiding all cover, until they were hit by an explosion and disappeared."

For a terrifying four hours, the deadly bombardment of the German

paratroopers, who could do nothing to escape, continued.

"We clung to each other, instinctively keeping our mouths open. It went on and on. ... Crouching in silence, we waited for the pitiless hail to end," wrote Lieutenant Schuster in his diary.

At 12.30, the final bombers dropped their load over Cassino. But the planes had barely left before the Allied artillery opened fire. Nearly one thousand guns pounded away at the tragic remains of Cassino, and over the following three hours fired more than 200,000 shells in a so-called creeping barrage, where the artillery advanced by around 100 metres every six minutes. German



RITZAUSCANPIX

German paratroopers had to endure hours of bombing from Allied planes.

1 CARPET BOMBING

At 08.30, 775 planes attack and drop thousands of bombs on German positions. Cassino town and Castle Hill alone are hit by 1,200 tonnes of bombs. At 12.30, the Allied artillery goes into action and fires over 200,000 shells at the town of Cassino.

3 ONSLAUGHT

Indian troops try to take Point 236 from Castle Hill, but are driven back.

Point 236

Castle Hill

CASSINO TOWN

Hotel Continental

Rapido River

The Germans fired mortars at the enemy from foxholes and ruins in Cassino.

2 INFANTRY ATTACK

Tanks and infantry from New Zealand and India attack Cassino town and then Castle Hill, 193 metres above. Castle Hill is captured, but in the town of Cassino, German paratroopers put up strong resistance – the attackers have to fight from house to house.

troops watching the bombardment from the surrounding mountains several kilometres away had difficulty keeping up.

“We can see nothing but dust and smoke. The troops who are lying up there must be going mad,” one soldier noted in his diary.

Germans fought back

The Allied bombing was reminiscent of World War I tactics, which hadn’t proved particularly effective at the time. The same was true now, even though the Allies had used five tonnes of explosives per German soldier in Cassino – 160 of the approximately 300

paratroopers were killed. And the survivors wasted no time, because they knew that as soon as the barrage ceased, the enemy would move in.

Virtually all the paratroopers’ heavy weapons were buried under rubble, but they still had their handguns. They hurried out of their foxholes and cellars to occupy the advantageous positions offered by the ruins instead. And they didn’t have to wait long, as the Allies’ General Freyberg, sure that none of the defenders could still be alive, sent his New Zealander infantry into the town from the north, supported by heavy tanks. It soon became apparent, however, that the bombing had made it

virtually impossible for the heavy vehicles to reach the town.

“There was no way the tanks could get through the heaps of rubble, which were over 20 feet high,” tank driver Brick Lorimer remembered.

While the New Zealanders struggled to clear the road, Lieutenant Schuster and a handful of soldiers attacked the first of the tanks with machine guns. Terrified, the New Zealanders hurried for cover, then one of Schuster’s men fired an anti-tank grenade at the vehicle. The crew jumped out of the burning tank but were defeated by

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paratroopers. Wherever the Allies entered the town, they were met by similar attacks.

The New Zealanders had more luck when they attacked Castle Hill immediately above Cassino town, where they quickly overpowered the defenders, who'd suffered heavy losses during the bombing. By the time evening fell, the Allies had captured just over half of Cassino, while the Germans continued to hold the town centre as well as the railway station.

During the fighting, a soldier from New Zealand heard screams from deep

under the rubble. They apparently came from a German soldier who'd been trapped in a basement during the bombing. The New Zealanders tried to dig him out, but when they came under fire, they had to give up: "So we had to abandon them to madness and death, crouched in a black vault."

Brutal battle on mountain

During the night of 16th March, German troops poured into the area to stop the Allies. Meanwhile, Indian soldiers had taken over Castle Hill, which the New Zealanders had previously captured. Under cover of darkness, the Indians tried to reach the monastery from Castle Hill, but were driven back. More fortunate was a division of Gurkhas, who sneaked from Castle Hill and took Hangman's Hill, 300 metres below the monastery.

As soon as the Germans in the monastery ruins discovered the Gurkhas, they turned their machine guns on them, but the tough Nepalese soldiers stubbornly held on to Hangman's Hill, despite heavy losses. However, no matter how hard the Allied troops tried, it was impossible to capture any more of the mountain.

The next day, in Cassino, troops from New Zealand managed to reach and occupy the strategically important train station at the southern end of the town. For the next day and a half, battles raged around the station, until the German forces had to give up after heavy losses. The Germans, in turn, kept the town's two hotels – the Hotel Continental and the Hotel des Roses – which they desperately defended.

Meanwhile, the Gurkhas on Hangman's Hill had been under constant fire for days. Attempts to drop supplies from the air to the exhausted troops, who had neither food nor water, had failed. To the delight of the German paratroopers, most of the supplies fell on their territory. But General Freyberg devised a plan to save the Gurkhas.

Rescue ended catastrophically

On 19th March, paratrooper Werner Eggert was with several comrades behind the ruined monastery when they heard noises. They looked down the slope and saw a large number of Allied light tanks on their way up the mountain road. The vehicles were

undoubtedly on their way to attack the monastery and rescue the Gurkhas.

Eggert and the others crawled into cover behind the ruins of a well house and watched the tanks while planning a counter-attack:

"The first came through and almost reached my water hideout. Suddenly it was standing there alone and we fired at it with a *Panzerschreck* [anti-tank rocket launcher] while it was trying to turn back. It came to a halt. The people stepped out and were taken as prisoners."

Now German artillery also began shelling the tanks, hitting six of them. From the monastery ruins, even more paratroopers ran down to take part in the battle. Among them was Lieutenant Raimund Eckel, who jumped up on to one of the tanks and placed a mine on the turret. The explosion put the armoured vehicle out of action.

Most of the other tanks were also rendered harmless, until the crews of the few remaining tanks surrendered.

"Unfortunately, we are fighting the best soldiers in the world – what men!"

FIELD MARSHAL ALEXANDER, EXPLAINING WHY MONTE CASSINO HAD NOT YET FALLEN.

Three days later, on 22nd March, General Freyberg pitted his New Zealanders one last time against the German positions, but the paratroopers stood firm. That same day, the Allies abandoned their third attempt to capture Monte Cassino.

Paratroopers became famous

When General Freyberg called off the attacks on Monte Cassino, the Gurkhas on Hangman's Hill were still surrounded by German units. The exhausted and wounded soldiers resolved the situation themselves by beginning the long march down from the mountain in full daylight – with a Red Cross flag fluttering on a pole. The German troops, who had gained great

Officer rescued treasures

The world can thank a single art-loving Austrian for rescuing a number of history's greatest cultural treasures. During a planning meeting in October 1943, staff officer Julius Schlegel of the German Army heard that Monte Cassino would probably be the focal point of the toughest battles on the Gustav Line.

Schlegel loved art and history, and knew that the monastery at the top of the mountain housed great treasures. He feared that the building and its contents would be destroyed, so secretly set about saving the priceless items.

Without telling his superiors – but with the monks' approval – he ordered troops and trucks to transport 70,000 books, paintings and manuscripts to the Vatican. When an Allied propaganda radio station accused the Germans of robbing the monastery, Schlegel feared repercussions from his superiors. But after interrogation, they let him continue the operation.



On the initiative of Julius Schlegel, German troops evacuated Monte Cassino monastery's treasures.



**The Allies fired around
200,000
shells in just three hours.**

RITZ/USCAMP/IX

Three soldiers pose on top of empty shells from the thousands that the Allies rained down on Monte Cassino.

respect for the hardy Gurkhas, allowed them to escape.

Lieutenant Schuster, who had launched the paratroopers' counter-attack on the New Zealanders on the first day, also survived the battle. He and his men were surrounded by Allied troops, but Schuster's unit managed to escape through enemy lines. Along the way, the lieutenant was shot in the chest and ordered his men to continue without him. He himself was captured and taken to an Allied hospital, where the dishevelled paratrooper, with his torn clothes and numerous wounds, attracted much attention.

When Field Marshal Harold Alexander, who had overall responsibility for the Allied troops in Italy, subsequently had to explain how a few hundred German paratroopers, with nothing much other than handguns, could hold off the Allies' thousands of soldiers, tanks and aircraft, he promptly replied:

"Unfortunately, we are fighting the best soldiers in the world – what men!"

Even Allied newspapers, which almost never wrote positively about the enemy's troops, had to admit that the German paratroopers were unique:

"Cassino has been transformed into a heap of rubble. But rubble furnishes ideal fighting material for bold and determined troops; and such are the troops whom the Germans have sent to Cassino with the specific object of holding the town for as long as possible," wrote *The Times* on 23rd March 1944.

However, the Allies did not intend to make the same mistake again. Over the following weeks, they gathered an enormous force that was to break the German resistance once and for all. On 11th May, the Allies attacked the Gustav Line with overwhelming might.

No one on the German side had foreseen the magnitude of the attack, and even on the first day, the Gustav

line was breached in several places. At Monte Cassino, the attackers included US, Polish and Moroccan troops, but the paratroopers again fought fiercely and forced the enemy to fight for every single metre.

The Polish forces had been tasked with capturing the monastery, but had to retreat after many losses. When the Moroccans broke through the Gustav Line near the west coast of Italy, five days later, Allied troops were able to move unhindered into the Liri Valley. The whole German defence now faltered, and the Poles again attacked the monastery, where the defenders gave up – Monte Cassino had finally fallen. Less than a month later, on 4th June 1944, the Allies entered Rome. ■



A number of paratroopers were caught when Monte Cassino was captured in May 1944. A few weeks after the defeat, the Allies occupied Rome.

MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/RITZ/USCAMP/IX

According to the plan, 3,300 German troops wearing American uniforms were to capture the bridges over the river Meuse

RITZAU SCANPIX & SHUTTERSTOCK/COLLAGE HISTORIE





Hitler's final ace in the hole: Soldiers in disguise

As Hitler planned his last offensive through the Ardennes against the Allies in December 1944, he secretly summoned the army's greatest commanding officer. Otto Skorzeny had freed Mussolini from captivity the year before, and now he had to lead a brigade deep behind enemy lines – disguised as American soldiers.

By Kasper Tonsberg Schlie & Niels-Peter Granzow Busch

The soldiers of the US Army military police had no suspicions about the three compatriots they'd just stopped in a Jeep near the Belgian village of Aywaille. The day before, 16th December 1944, the German Army had surprised the Allies with a major offensive through the Ardennes. Thousands of American troops were in retreat, and they all had to go through a series of checkpoints on the route west.

Addressing the three men in the Jeep, one MP asked for that day's password. In English, the Jeep's driver, who called himself Charles Lawrence, replied that they hadn't been told. However, the

MPs had no intention of letting the trio off so easily. They ordered the men out of the vehicle, then searched the Jeep. There, among other items, they found a German machine gun, explosives and lots of counterfeit dollar bills.

The discovery prompted the astonished military police to frisk the soldiers, who – despite their ordinary appearance – turned out to be anything but regular American GIs. Under the olive-green American uniform, the three men wore the German Army's grey regimentals, and three ID cards from the German Wehrmacht revealed that the men were actually named Günther Billing, Wilhelm Schmidt and

Manfred Pernass. During an hour-long interrogation, the three men admitted that they were German commandos sent by Otto Skorzeny himself – Nazi Germany's uncrowned master of operations. And they were far from alone. According to the prisoners, several disguised German units had infiltrated behind Allied lines. Some had to capture the bridges over the River Meuse, while other units were on their way to Paris. When the interrogators inquired about the »»

mission in Paris, the hairs on the back of their necks rose – according to prisoner Wilhelm Schmidt, the aim of the disguised commandos was to kill the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower.

Hitler's last offensive

The idea for Nazi Germany's most daring commando operation, dubbed Operation Greif, was hatched by Adolf Hitler himself in the autumn of 1944. On 22nd October, he invited SS officer Otto Skorzeny to his headquarters, Wolfsschanze (Wolf's Lair). The 36-year-old Austrian was greatly respected by the Führer after carrying out several spectacular commando operations.

Hitler revealed a plan to Skorzeny that he'd been secretly working on since the Allied landings in Normandy, four months earlier. The Führer explained that Germany was under pressure on every front and had just one chance left to turn the war around.

A large-scale winter offensive through the Ardennes to the west was to divide the US and British forces, and recapture the port of Antwerp in Belgium, from where the Allies received vital supplies. The goal was to slow the Americans' advance and give the Nazis time to throw the full force of their newly developed wonder weapons at the enemy. Hitler's hope was that he could thereby secure a peace deal in the west and thus be able to send all his forces to battle the Soviets in the east.

If the Ardennes offensive was to be successful, it required German troops to reach Antwerp within a week – so

Hitler needed Skorzeny. On the way to Antwerp, German troops had to cross the Meuse, but if the Americans destroyed the bridges over the river,



German soldier Günther Billing (right), along with two others, was captured wearing US uniforms behind enemy lines.

they'd be able to gather their strength and mount an effective defence. It couldn't be allowed to happen.

"One of the most important tasks in this offensive will be entrusted to you and the units under your command, which will have to go ahead and seize one or more of the bridges over the Meuse," Hitler explained, according to Skorzeny's memoirs.

The Führer's plan was for Skorzeny to set up a special unit: Panzer Brigade 150, with 3,300 men. There was one catch: "You will have to wear British and American uniforms," said Hitler.

Lack of English-speakers

According to the Führer's plan, which was known to only a few, Skorzeny's

brigade was to be equipped with Allied weapons and vehicles to trick the enemy and reach the bridges that lay over a hundred kilometres behind the front line. Once there, the disguised units also had to create chaos by cutting telephone lines, removing mine warnings and taking away road signs so that Allied troops would become lost.

Skorzeny knew the mission had little chance of success, but the Führer's words were law, so he immediately set about forming his armoured brigade. After meeting with Hitler, he travelled to the headquarters of the new brigade at Grafenwöhr, in southern Germany. By the time he arrived, the High Command had already sent an order to all units: everyone who spoke fluent English was to report "for special tasks on the Western Front".

Skorzeny had not been informed of the order beforehand, and rightly feared it would be intercepted by the enemy.

"I was almost choked with rage," Skorzeny wrote in his book.

He was right in his prediction: a month later, the Allies heard about the special order – but, luckily for the Germans, nothing was done about it.

However, there was a good response to the High Command's order. Within a week, 600 volunteers showed up at the barracks. However, Skorzeny's mood took another dive when his language

The Ardennes offensive was Hitler's idea. Here, he plans the attack with Göring.

GETTY IMAGES



experts reported that just 10 of them spoke fluent English, 40 spoke the language reasonably well, while 150 could make themselves understood when needed. The majority could in no way pass as Americans.

"200 spoke broken English and another 200 could answer yes or no," wrote Skorzeny. "It was therefore impossible to form an 'English-speaking brigade'."

Wrong uniforms

Skorzeny chose instead to ask the army command to set up a commando company with the 120 soldiers who spoke the best English, while the rest of the troops were to avoid speaking to the enemy. Together with experienced commandos from his own SS unit, paratroopers and regular tank units, the brigade was able to muster about 2,500 soldiers.

Skorzeny had demanded that almost the entire brigade be equipped with captured American vehicles: 20 Sherman tanks, 247 Jeeps, 32 armoured personnel carriers and 193 trucks. When the equipment arrived, the Austrian was furious once again. Skorzeny received only a third of the vehicles requested, and much of the equipment wasn't American at all, but Soviet. According to Skorzeny, the tanks were completely wrong:

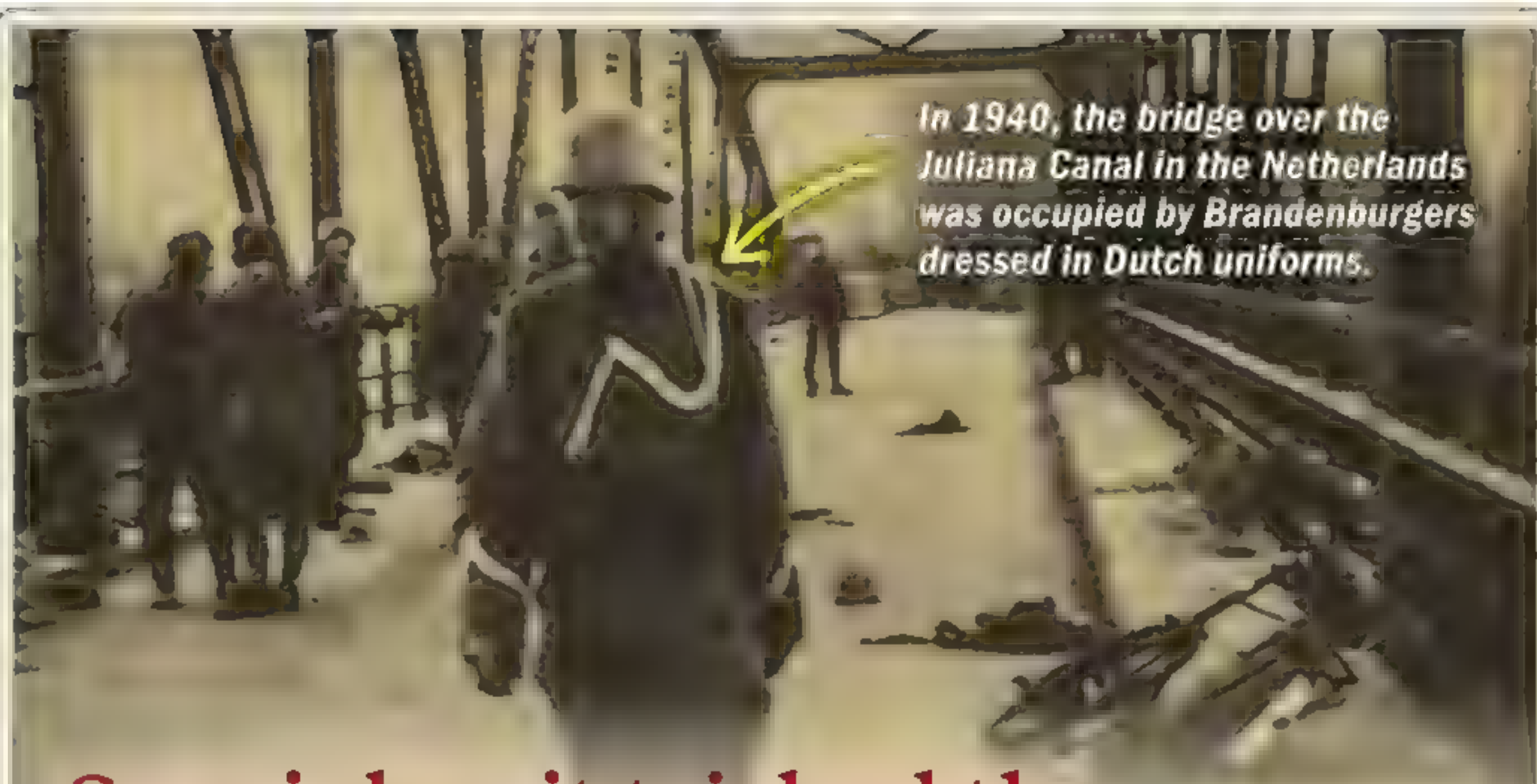
"I received two, [only] one of which was in working order."

Instead, the brigade had to camouflage 12 German Panther tanks, so they resembled American ones. When Skorzeny saw the results, however, he was not impressed:

"[They] might perhaps be able to fool the young American soldiers from a distance and in ... poor visibility."

The camouflage consisted of painting the tanks and other vehicles in the Americans' olive-green field paint, as well as applying the characteristic white star to them. The troops also shortened the tanks' gun barrels and welded tin plates on the turrets, giving them a more 'American' shape.

However, the deception created the obvious risk of the tanks being shelled by their own side. Skorzeny therefore demanded that a small, yellow triangle be placed on the rear of all the vehicles. In the case of visual contact with their own side, the tank crews were told to >>>



In 1940, the bridge over the Juliana Canal in the Netherlands was occupied by Brandenburgers dressed in Dutch uniforms.

Special unit tricked the enemy again and again

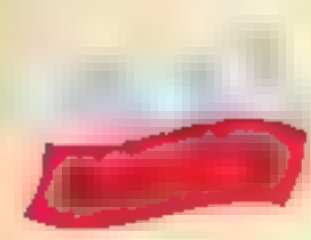
Before the Ardennes offensive, Nazi Germany had deployed commandos in fake uniforms on almost every front with great success.

Skorzeny's wasn't the first German unit to sneak behind enemy lines in disguise. As early as 1939, the Abwehr intelligence service, under Admiral Canaris, established a top-secret unit that came to be based in the town of Brandenburg an der Havel that gave them their name Brandenburgers.

The recruits received advanced combat training and were trained to infiltrate enemy units in disguise. The majority were ethnic Germans, or

volksdeutsche, from other countries, and could speak several languages. When Hitler shut down the Abwehr service in February 1944 on suspicion of treason, the Brandenburgers were also disbanded. Many of the unit's troops ended up in a new special unit instead: the 502nd SS Hunter Battalion, which was led by Skorzeny.

Before then, however, the secretive Brandenburgers managed to play a crucial role in a long line of offensives.



On 10th September 1939, the German invasion of Poland was in full swing. A Polish unit stubbornly defended a strategically important railway bridge at Demblin. Suddenly, another Polish unit appeared to replace the troops and take over the defence. After the handover, the fresh troops removed their uniforms; they were Polish-speaking Germans from the unit that would later become known as the Brandenburgers.



During the invasion of the **Netherlands in 1940**, Brandenburgers disguised as Dutch sailors sailed into the country on barges. Others wore Dutch uniforms and captured a number of important bridges and intersections. Out of 61 targets in the Netherlands and Belgium, Brandenburgers secured 42, clearing a path for the German armoured divisions.



In August 1942, the Brandenburgers were among the Germans who reached the east during the war against the Soviet Union; 62 Russian-speaking commandos drove a column of Soviet trucks all the way to the town of Maykop in the North Caucasus, home to an important oil field. Disguised as Soviet intelligence officers, they were politely shown around the city's defences before ordering Soviet units to leave the area.



Abwehr's leader, Admiral Canaris, saw the potential of the Brandenburgers.

turn their gun barrels to '9 o'clock', while disguised soldiers in the same situation had to remove their helmets – something no soldier would do in the face of the enemy.

The situation was not much better in terms of uniforms. Instead of US ones, they received bits of British uniforms.

Skorzeny then received a shipment of American overcoats, all of which had triangular patches sewn on, indicating that the uniforms came from Allied soldiers in German prisoner of war camps. Skorzeny summed up the

situation: "It was an eloquent comment on the way the business was handled that the commander of the brigade – myself – got nothing but an American army pullover in my size!"

The lack of equipment eroded the morale of the new brigade, which didn't even know what the mission's goal was. Only Skorzeny was aware of Hitler's plan. The secrecy caused rumours to fly. Captain Stielau, commander of the battalion's special commando company, demanded a meeting at Skorzeny's office to confirm his suspicions.

"I know what our mission really is: we are supposed to capture General Eisenhower," Stielau proclaimed.

Instead of dismissing the rumour, Skorzeny dashed to the open door to see if anyone else was nearby: "My dear fellow, please speak quietly. You have hit the mark. But not a word to anyone – this is most important."

"You can count on my absolute silence," replied Stielau. "But allow me to say that I know Paris and its

surroundings like my vest pocket, and I can be really useful if the need arises."

Skorzeny's attempt to mislead those closest to him was intended to ensure that any rumours that did reach the Allies were about anything other than the impending offensive. However, stories of Eisenhower's kidnapping were to have unexpected consequences.

Elite unit became spearhead

Captain Stielau didn't have the faintest idea what the mission was really about, but he'd been chosen to lead the armoured brigade's spearhead – a commando company of 120 soldiers who were to drive in small, autonomous teams to the bridges over the Meuse. Here they were to reconnoitre and note where the Americans had placed their explosive charges and machine gun positions. On the way back to the German lines, the teams had to wreak as much havoc as possible.

What became known as the Stielau unit consisted of Germans who could

Skorzeny was "Europe's most dangerous man"

The name Otto Skorzeny sent a chill running down any Allied soldier's back. In 1944, a US intelligence service described the Austrian as "the most dangerous man in Europe" – and for good reason. Skorzeny was the most famous commando of the Third Reich and was notorious for his spectacular operations around Europe.

OTTO SKORZENY

**Bold missions made
Skorzeny famous – and
infamous – worldwide.**

WALTEN FRENTZ COLLECTION/
SCALA ARCHIVES

MISSION DETAILS

FLOOD MOSCOW

Location: Soviet Union Year: 1941

During the Battle of Moscow, Skorzeny fought in the Waffen-SS and one of his orders was to capture the locks along the Moscow-Volga Canal after invading the city, because Hitler hoped to flood Moscow. It never happened because the city held out. It was during the fighting in Russia that Skorzeny got a taste for special operations.

For over three months,
Moscow withstood
Hitler's troops

MISSION DETAILS

STOP SUPPLIES

Location: Iran Year: 1943

Skorzeny's commando unit – the 502nd SS Hunter Battalion – was sent to Iran. Large quantities of Allied munitions were shipped through Iran to the Soviet Union, so Skorzeny's men collaborated with local tribes to carry out sabotage operations. However, the Germans ran out of gold to offer the tribes, so the mission had to be stopped.

**Huge quantities of munitions were
taken through Iran to the Soviet Union.**

speaking fluent US English, use slang, and answer simple questions about the United States, on subjects such as baseball, politics or state capitals.

"In the few weeks at our disposal, we could hardly hope to teach them their jobs properly," Skorzeny wrote.

Still, Skorzeny did his best to train the soldiers. The Stielau unit was the only group in Panzer Brigade 150 to be trained in all facets of special operations: explosives, radio technology and the study of enemy uniforms and weapons. The 120 soldiers were even sent to prison camps in Küstrin and Limburg to talk to US soldiers for hours so they could learn the latest slang.

Stielau's troops had to look American from head to toe: they got the best uniforms, the latest Jeeps, and US weapons, such as M1 carbines and Colt pistols. Thousands of dollars were to be used to bribe the locals – or to escape the clutches of the Americans. The unit had to be indistinguishable from US soldiers, so Skorzeny invented a clever

method of recognising them. The Stielau soldiers weren't allowed to fasten the second highest button on their coat, and were ordered to wear a discreet red or blue scarf.

The Stielau unit was further divided into three main groups: a demolition group, a reconnaissance group and a commando group, each of which was divided into smaller units of three to six men. The demolition units had the task of destroying the enemy's fuel depots, while the reconnaissance units were to drive into enemy territory and check out the bridges over the Meuse.

These units were also supposed to sabotage the enemy's communication lines and trick the Allied troops into following the wrong routes. Finally, the commando units were to accompany the regular German troops and create confusion among the fleeing Americans.

Behind enemy lines

Shortly before the Ardennes offensive, Skorzeny was called to a final briefing

by Hitler. The brigade leader told the Führer that despite having to improvise from start to finish, they'd do their best.

The Führer listened and gave Skorzeny a final order: "I ... know that it is your style to be at the head of your men. In this case I expressly forbid you to cross our lines. ... You will not leave your command post and will direct 'Operation Greif' from there by radio. I don't want you to run the risk of being captured."

However, the offensive had to be postponed several times due to the weather; without low cloud cover, the Allied air forces would quickly bomb the Germans into retreat. On Saturday 16th December, the weather was finally perfect. At 05.30, 1,600 German guns launched a massive bombardment.

When the smoke settled, three armoured divisions attacked through »»



Hitler awarded Skorzeny the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves for his impressive work.

MISSION DETAILS

FREE MUSSOLINI

Location: **Italy** Year: **1943**

After the Allied invasion of Sicily, Mussolini fell out of favour with the king of Italy and was imprisoned in a hotel on the Gran Sasso massif. Hitler ordered an operation to liberate him, and Skorzeny quickly worked out where Mussolini was being held captive. Along with 100 German commandos in gliders, he stormed the remote hotel and flew away with the dictator in a small propeller plane.

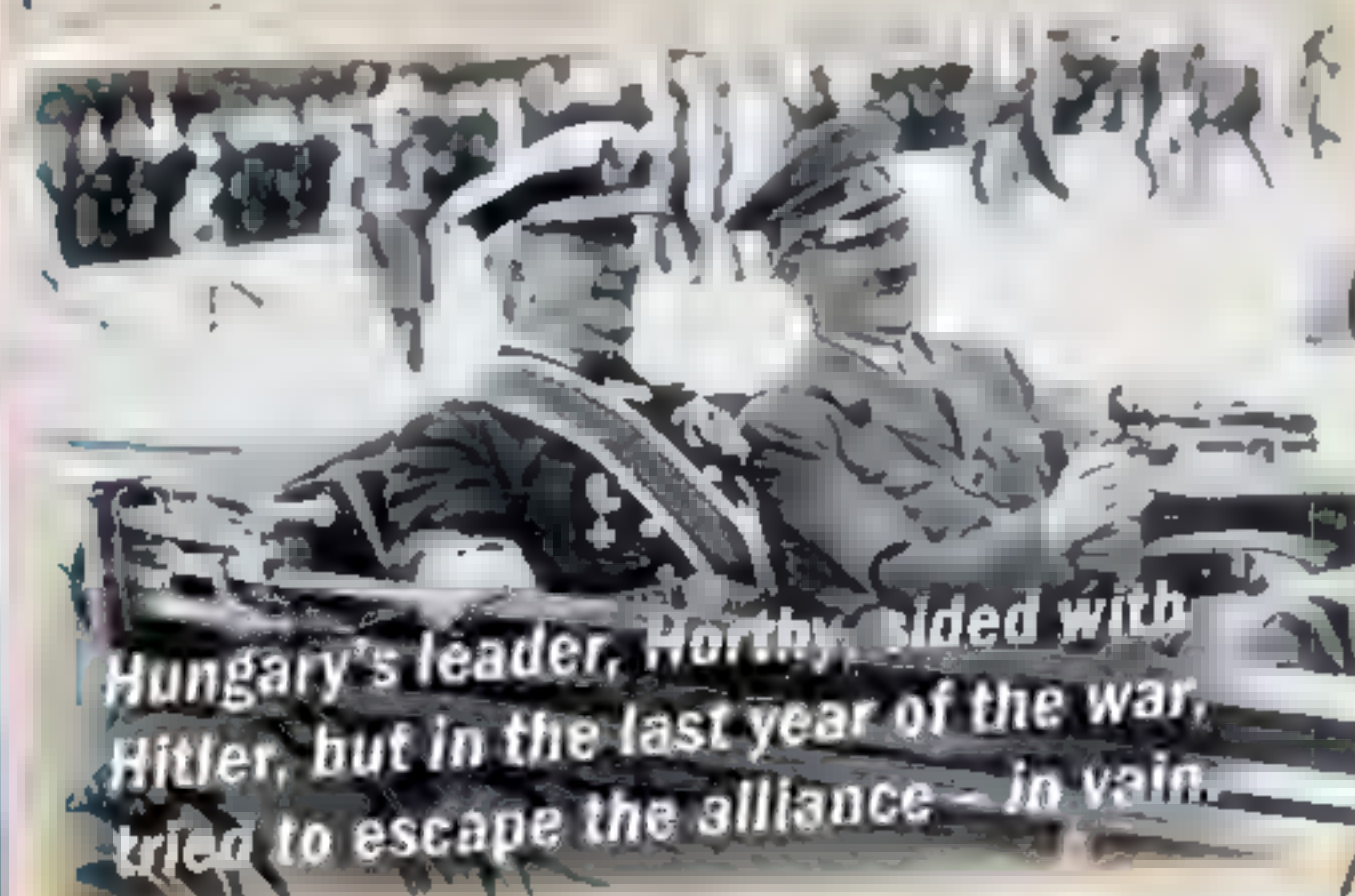


MISSION DETAILS

BREAK HUNGARY'S LEADER

Location: **Hungary** Year: **1944**

For years, Hungary had fought side by side with Germany, but in 1944, the country's leader, Horthy, began peace talks with the Soviet Union. Hitler promptly sent Skorzeny to Budapest, where he kidnapped Horthy's son. Then Skorzeny drove to Buda Castle and forced Horthy to appoint a pro-German head of state.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GERT MEYER

the hilly terrain of the Ardennes. Immediately, Skorzeny's highly mobile Stielau unit raced around the main forces and penetrated further behind enemy lines via small forest roads.

Nine small units with a total of 44 disguised soldiers went off, each with their own target, the most important of which were the Meuse bridges in the Belgian cities of Amay, Huy and Andenne, over 100 kilometres away. Only when the units had passed their own troops and were alone behind enemy lines, did they put their US uniforms on over their German ones:

"For our driver this was a real feat of acrobatics performance, as it was impossible for us to stop and he had to carry out his undressing act while we were on the move," Sergeant Heinz Rohde explained after the war.

He was a member of one of four reconnaissance groups tasked with reaching the Meuse bridges.

Soon after donning their disguises, the team saw the first enemy troops. An American sergeant tried with shouts and gestures to make them turn around – probably in the belief that they were

US troops fleeing from the front. But Rohde and his group drove past without stopping. Shortly afterwards, further down the road, they saw a military

“English-speaking Germans had infiltrated us”

INTELLIGENCE OFFICER TO GENERAL OMAR BRADLEY

policeman: "An Ami [American] as tall as a tree was standing there. ... With a motorcycle carelessly thrown beside him, he pulled us on to a side road and the artillery fire falling on the main road ahead convinced us that his efforts were directed towards protecting us from it."

Rohde and his men thanked the MP and hurried on. Apparently, the disguises and the soldiers' language training convinced the Americans, but their success was also due to luck: "We

thought at first that every Ami could spot us as Germans from a thousand metres away," said one soldier, when he was interrogated after the war. "But the shelling, the poor light and the confusion of the opposition helped us through those first tense hours."

Traffic jam stopped brigade

While Skorzeny's commando units raced against time to reach the River Meuse, Panzer Brigade 150 ran into trouble. It was supposed to stay behind the rest of the divisions until they reached the hills. Then, the brigade's approximately 2,000 men were to drive as quickly as possible through enemy territory, capture the Meuse bridges and hold them until the main German troops arrived. However, this plan required the main troops to actually manage to break through the front line.

In some places, the Germans broke through quickly, but around noon, it became clear that the front line was still holding. The enemy's strength, narrow muddy roads and poor visibility created a German traffic jam that, at some points, was 30 kilometres long.

"The narrow roads were clogged with every type vehicle, and I had to cover 10 km on foot," wrote Skorzeny.

By the end of the day, the troops ahead of Panzer Brigade 150 had only advanced about five kilometres from the original front. The next morning, Skorzeny could see that the situation was unchanged: "I made my way to the front. ... The roads were now completely clogged. There was no more talk of reaching the Meuse bridges!"

According to the plan, Panzer Brigade 150 should have captured the bridges by the second day of the offensive. Any later and the element of surprise would have been lost. The Austrian therefore made a difficult decision at the end of day two:

"After informing the Wehrmacht operations staff (Jodl) and obtaining his consent, I placed my brigade at the disposal of 1 Panzer Corps."

The brigade's 2,000 Germans were now to fight as ordinary soldiers – but with fake US weapons and vehicles. However, Skorzeny didn't cancel the Stielau unit's

While Skorzeny's troops were stuck in a traffic jam, other German units initially had great success.

GETTY IMAGES



missions, as they could continue to be a great help to the offensive. The commandos therefore carried on relentlessly behind enemy lines.

Commandos tricked enemy

During the first 24 hours of the offensive, two of Skorzeny's disguised reconnaissance units reached the River Meuse. Led by Captain Fritz Bussinger, one of the groups drove into the town of Huy, where, on foot, they observed that the bridge over the Meuse hadn't yet been laid with American explosive devices. The group informed their command via radio about the situation.

Just as Bussinger was about to leave town, he was accosted by a US officer at the head of an armoured column. The tanks were supposed to be heading towards the town of Marche, but Bussinger informed the officer that the Germans had captured the roads leading to the town, and he then sent the unsuspecting US armoured column in a completely different direction.

"Our radio monitoring service confirmed that the headquarters of the American 1st Army searched in vain for this unit for two days," Skorzeny wrote.

On the way back to the German lines, Bussinger's unit cut telephone cables and removed road signs. According to Skorzeny, another German vehicle crossed the Meuse at Amary: "Its occupants placed red banners to indicate that the roads to the front had been mined."

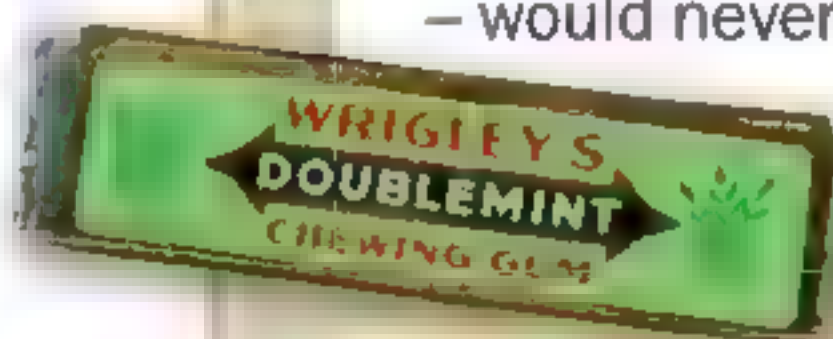
Several US Army columns therefore had to turn around and take lengthy detours towards the front line. On 17th December, a group of disguised Germans even stopped at a crossroads and the leader climbed on to his bonnet to point the entire 16th US Infantry Regiment in the wrong direction. US Sergeant Keoghan reached the scene after the Germans had left and spoke to an MP who had seen them:

"He said that when they got [there], two of the men were still directing the outfit down the wrong road. When they saw the MPs coming, they hauled out so fast that one of them couldn't get into the Jeep. He was standing on the front bumper hanging on to the wire-cutter. And they went down the road as fast as the Jeep would go."

But not every group was successful in fooling the Americans. On the second

CHEWING GUM

A German soldier – unlike an American – would never chew gum. Something Skorzeny's men had to learn to do.



SCARF

Other German units were able to recognise the commando troops by their blue or red scarf and unfastened second button on their jacket.

HIDDEN EQUIPMENT

The small commando teams had a secret box in their Jeep. Here they kept counterfeit dollars for bribes, explosives, German weapons and their real ID cards.

LUCKY STRIKE

Skorzeny's men were given US Lucky Strike cigarettes. They had to practise opening the pack like an American, and only smoke two thirds of a cigarette, like US soldiers.



German to Yankee

Skorzeny did nothing by half: Panzer Brigade 150 was supposed to look like Americans, walk like Americans, and chew gum like Americans. Some details, however, were needed to make them recognisable to other Germans. There was far from enough equipment for all the soldiers in the brigade, so only the special Stielau unit was disguised as US soldiers in every detail.

day of the offensive, the unit comprising Günther Billing and his two comrades was captured, and soon after, things went wrong for another of the Stielau units. A Jeep containing four Germans drove up to a fuel depot, where one of them said in English: "Petrol please."

The soldier at the depot immediately became suspicious, because an American would say "gas" and would be unlikely to say "please".

The American's mistrust caused the driver to race off at high speed, and shortly after, hit a truck. The Germans were captured and interrogated. In

WEAPON

Skorzeny's troops were armed with the M1 carbine, the American infantry's standard weapon.



NO BADGES

The regimental badges were removed, but if anyone asked, the Germans had to say that they were from the American 5th Armored Division.

The physically fit troops – who, with their slender physique, would make any American fitness instructor cry with joy – also had to remember to slouch.

accordance with what the other captured unit had said, they confessed what they believed to be true, causing panic among half a million Allied soldiers: thousands of disguised Germans were operating behind the front line, some of whom were tasked with assassinating Eisenhower. The information was promptly sent to the Allied High Command in Paris.

Panic in France

A simple story from seven Germans in American uniforms had major consequences. That same day,

Mission was a failure and a success

The goal of capturing at least three of the main bridges over the river Meuse failed, but the commandos still proved their worth.

On paper, Hitler's plan was simple: first, small highly mobile commando units were to reconnoitre the bridges over the Meuse and create chaos

among Americans by cutting telephone cables and removing road signs. Shortly after, three armoured groups from Panzer Brigade 150 were to capture the bridges before the fleeing Americans could blow them up. Strong US resistance,

however, meant that only the first part of the plan was completed. Panzer Brigade 150 never reached the Meuse. Instead, the soldiers were deployed in an attack on the town of Malmedy, but they couldn't break through the defence.



The Americans captured several German soldiers dressed in fake uniforms.

RITZAU SCANPIX

5 THE UNLUCKY ONES

Skorzeny sends 44 commandos into Belgium, but not all of them return. At least one is killed and seven captured, three of whom are subsequently executed at Henri-Chapelle.

3 THE BRIDGES

Nine small commando units race around the fighting. Three reach all the way to the bridges over the Meuse at the towns of Huy and Amay, among others. At least two more are captured along the way.

BELGIUM

4 THE BRIGADE

While the bridges are being reconnoitred, Skorzeny calls off the mission. Panzer Brigade 150 becomes a regular army unit. The brigade unsuccessfully tries to capture Malmedy in Belgium.

After the mission was called off, Panzer Brigade 150 was deployed at Malmedy.



IMAGESSELECT

2 THE ATTACK

On the morning of 16th December, around 400,000 German soldiers begin a huge offensive. Panzer Brigade 150 advances behind them, but US resistance results in a German traffic jam.

Front line on 16th December 1944

1 DEPLOYMENT

Panzer Brigade 150 assembles in Bad Münstereifel on 14th December and prepares to repeat the success of 1940, when the Germans surprised the Allies with a lightning strike through the Ardennes.

GERMANY



BAD MÜNSTEREIFEL



HOLLAND

HENRI-CHAPELLE

LIÈGE

Amay

Huy

Andenne

MALMEDY

General Eisenhower – the commander-in-chief of the Allied forces – heard that assassins were on their way to the Versailles headquarters. “The report was astonishing,” Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs.

“For several months I had been driving everywhere around France with no more protection than that provided by an orderly and an aide who habitually rode in the car with me. The story was brought to me on 20th December by a very agitated American colonel who was certain that he had complete and positive proof of the existence of such a plot.”

Eisenhower’s secretary, Kay Summersby, described how everyone thought Skorzeny himself was on his way. HQ was promptly surrounded by tanks and the number of soldiers quadrupled. No one could get in or out without saying the day’s password.

“The pass system became a strict matter of life or death,” Summersby later wrote.

But Eisenhower wasn’t convinced by the intelligence: “I discounted the murder theory but agreed to move my quarters closer to headquarters.”

While Eisenhower hid at HQ, the general’s service car drove on schedule between Paris and Versailles. In the back seat sat his double, Colonel Baldwin Smith, who resembled Eisenhower to a T.

Photos of Otto Skorzeny with the words “Saboteur” and “Assassin” were distributed throughout France. Before long, the Allied High Command began receiving a large number of reports of false sightings. The Austrian commando was apparently seen everywhere: from a grocery shop in the town of Saint-Étienne 500 km south of Paris to a smoky bar in the middle of the Champs-Élysées.

Rumours of thousands of Germans in American uniforms resulted in collective paranoia along the front. The queues at American checkpoints got longer and longer, as everyone was grilled on popular American topics. When US General Bruce Clark couldn’t answer a question about baseball, he was promptly arrested and detained.

General Omar Bradley wrote: “A half-million GIs played cat and mouse with each other every time they met on the road. Neither rank nor credentials

spared the traveller an inquisition at each intersection he passed.”

Bradley himself was detained when he answered a question incorrectly. An

***“Neither rank
nor credentials
spared the
traveller an
inquisition
at each
intersection”***

GENERAL OMAR BRADLEY

officer later told Bradley to travel by plane as “English-speaking Germans in captured America ODs [olive drab uniforms] had infiltrated our lines”.

The paranoia had fatal consequences for four US soldiers. Two were shot in Bellevue, Belgium, on 20th December, when a patrol thought they were Germans in US uniforms. In Warden, the 6th Armoured Division began firing

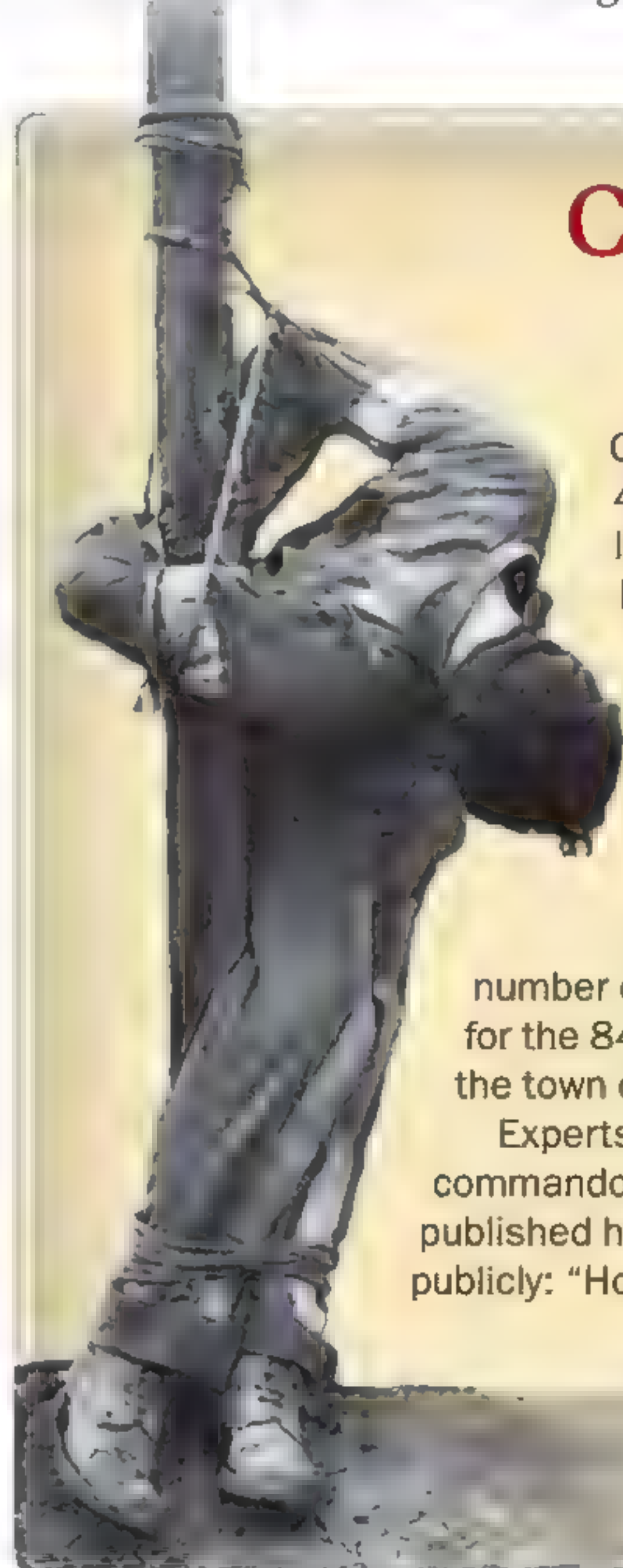
on soldiers from the 35th Infantry Division because they thought they were Germans in disguise; two died.

Praise from Hitler

Skorzeny’s commandos achieved more than anyone other than Hitler had dreamed of: two important bridges over the Meuse river were reconnoitred, and intelligence about access roads and enemy movements was sent to HQ.

However, the information was useless: the most successful armoured units reached just over 100 km into enemy territory before being stopped on 26th December, just 6 km from the river. Allied planes then drove the Germans back. The Führer’s failed Ardennes offensive ended up costing the Germans over 100,000 soldiers.

On 31st December, Skorzeny went to Hitler’s HQ. He regretted that the operation had not gone better, but the Führer swept his remorse aside: “I have no complaints with you, Skorzeny. You had to improvise everything, with limited means, and your panzer brigade couldn’t play its role in cooperation with 6th Army. Where your commando unit is concerned, I have the impression that its psychological effect was much greater than you might think.” ■



Commandos paid the ultimate price

Otto Skorzeny claimed that only eight of the total of 44 commandos who managed to get behind American lines during the Ardennes offensive were captured. But Heinz Rohde, who was one of the 44 soldiers, reported that when the commando units met after the mission, about two-thirds were missing.

The Americans claimed that they’d captured a lot of disguised commandos. The explanation, however, was that many of the regular German troops had been wearing stolen bits of American uniform during the fighting to keep warm. A large number of them were shot by US troops who wanted revenge for the 84 American prisoners of war killed by SS soldiers near the town of Malmedy.

Experts estimate that at least 15 soldiers from Skorzeny’s commando units were executed. When Skorzeny triumphantly published his book on Operation Greif in 1950, Rohde raged publicly: “How lightly you sent us out to almost certain death!”

The Americans executed the three German commandos who had been captured wearing fake uniforms near the city of Ayrwille on 17th December.



SURRENDER

After capturing Vitebsk on 27th June, the Soviets interrogated the captured German officers.

UKRAINIAN SSR



CELEBRATION

Soviet troops liberated the Belarusian capital, Minsk, on 3rd July.

INCREASINGLY AS AN ILLUSTRATION

Operation Bagration:

Stalin's revenge on Hitler

In the summer of 1944, Stalin deployed a diversionary feint to trick the Germans into transferring their best panzer units to Ukraine in anticipation of a major Soviet offensive there. It left Stalin free to assemble a secret army of 1.6 million soldiers ahead of a crushing strike on Belarus. By the time the Germans realised they'd been tricked, the hammer had fallen.

Joseph Stalin had waited three long years to pay Hitler back for Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



LOCALS

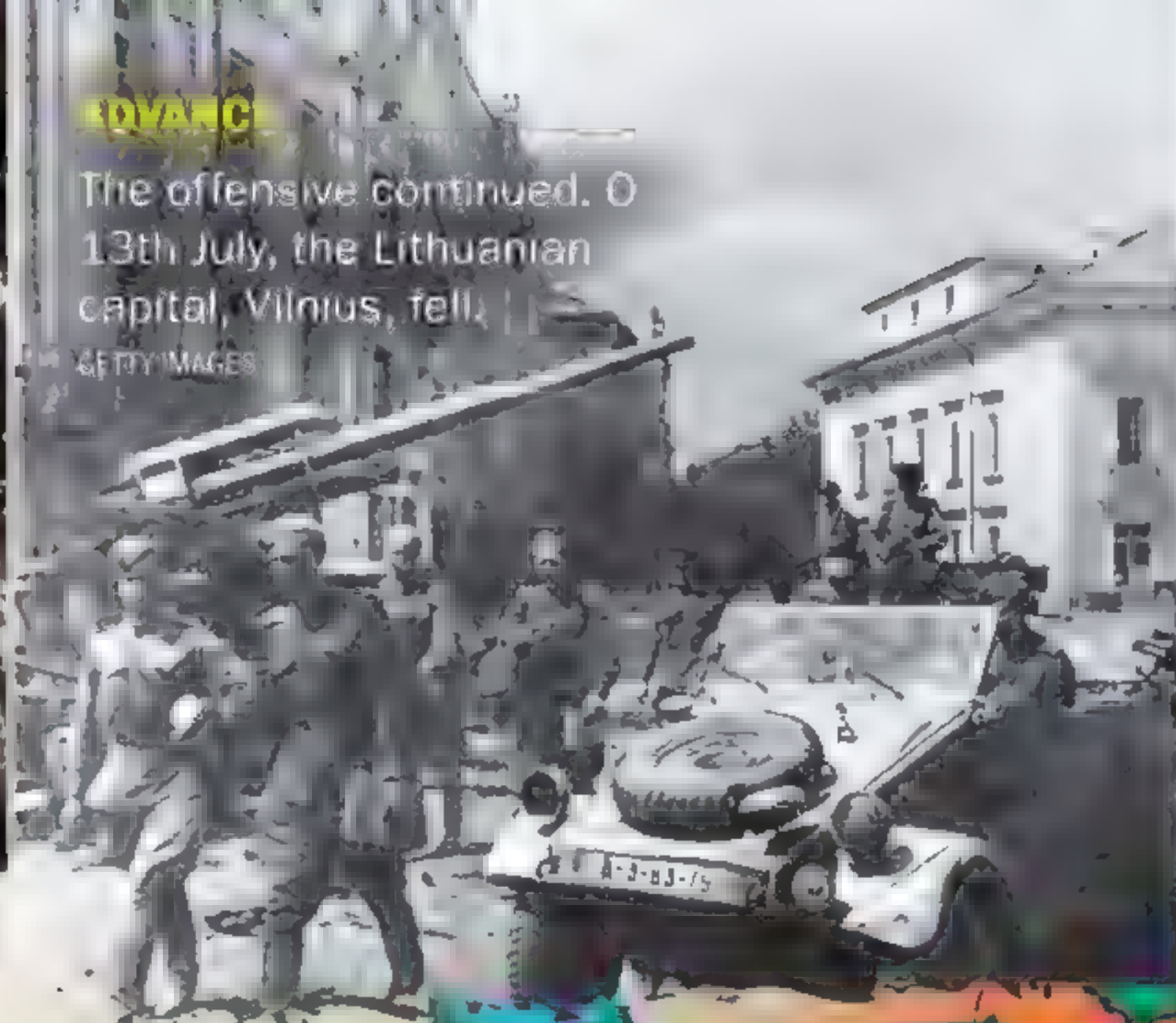
Minsk welcomed Soviet troops as liberators.

INCREDIBLY ES4U
BLOOM

ADVANCE

The offensive continued. On 13th July, the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, fell.

GETTY IMAGES



COLLABORATION

In the summer of 1944, Polish soldiers helped the Red Army.



Diversionsary manoeuvre

The Germans believed the upcoming Soviet offensive would target Ukraine. But Stalin directed his troops into Belarus.



MINSK

By Else Christensen & Andreas Abildgaard

The earth shook as the sound of exploding shells shattered the night's silence. "A thundering within my skull" was how German soldier Armin Scheiderbauer described the experience.

The 20-year-old adjutant, part of the Wehrmacht's Grenadier Regiment 472, had calmed his nerves the night before with schnapps. Now he woke, exhausted and dazed, to the sound of the enemy's attack. Scheiderbauer

huddled up in the trench that he and his comrades were manning outside the city of Vitebsk in Belarus. It was 22nd June 1944, and the time was 03.05.

The timing was deliberate. Three years earlier – almost to the minute – Germany had launched Operation Barbarossa, its invasion of the Soviet Union. Now the hour of retribution had arrived.

The bombardment marked the beginning of a major – and meticulously planned – Soviet offensive. Its aim was to crush the German forces in Belarus to open a road to Berlin and the Red Army's final victory.

The Red Army was in a strong position for its operation in the summer of 1944. The Germans, who initially

enjoyed a spell of sustained success, had suffered as the fortunes of war turned irrevocably in the winter of 1942-43, when the Wehrmacht had suffered a humiliating defeat at Stalingrad.

After this, the Germans had been on the back foot. Army Group North had been forced to abandon its siege of Leningrad, which was finally liberated on 27th January 1944, while in the Crimea, Army Group South had also found itself being pushed back.

Only one army group had withstood the Soviet fierce counter-offensives so far: in Belarus, Army Group Centre continued to stand firm with its 600,000 troops under the command of Field Marshal Ernst Busch.

Barely three years earlier, Stalin had been forced to evacuate large parts of his government from Moscow as the Germans approached. It was this that inspired his naming of the 1944

»»

The Red Army's rapid advance enabled them to surround and destroy large parts of the German Army.

SPUTNIK



Führer's blunders cost Germany dear

German victory seemed assured when its troops marched across the Soviet border on 22nd June 1941. No one had yet been able to resist Hitler's armies – until in late summer 1942, they reached the city of Stalingrad on the Volga River. Here the Red Army encircled the German 6th

Army, led by Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus.

The trapped German Army starved and froze during the severe winter until forced to surrender in February 1943. Paulus's men had finally run out of ammunition. The fighting cost the Germans 180,000 men and

became a turning point in WWII. Thereafter, German forces were almost always on the retreat.

An attempt to reverse the fortunes of war was made in the summer of 1943, when German troops tried to encircle the Red Army near the city of Kursk – about 450 km south of

Moscow. However, heavily fortified Soviet lines of defence, as well as entrenched resistance from T-34 tanks, stopped the attack. The following year, Stalin launched Operation Bagration to crush German fighting strength on the Eastern Front once and for all.



The capture of Stalingrad became of paramount importance to Hitler. His obsession cost 180,000 German lives.

RITZAU SCANPIX

offensive as Operation Bagration: Pyotr Bagration was the Russian general who in 1812 defended Moscow to the last against Napoleon's invading army.

Feints fooled the Germans

Operation Bagration was part of a large-scale offensive that had been agreed upon a year previously by Allied leaders Stalin, US President Franklin D Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, in Tehran.

The US and UK would land troops in Normandy as part of Operation Overlord – better known as D-Day – to force the Germans to retreat from the west. Meanwhile, Stalin would push the Germans back from the east. Where the Soviet operation would take place, however, was a secret that not even Stalin's closest allies – never mind Roosevelt and Churchill – were told.

Stalin's spies informed him that the Germans knew that something was going on. However, the Nazis remained unaware that Army Group Centre in

Belarus was the target. On the contrary, German high command was convinced the Soviets would focus on Ukraine, where the Red Army had already made huge strides earlier that year.

“Its aim was to crush the German forces in Belarus”

Stavka – the Soviet general staff – ensured the Germans remained ignorant. In May 1944, the Red Army carried out a series of inventive manoeuvres. Fake radio broadcasts about troop movements, combined with the deployment of dummy weapons, helped reinforce the Germans' belief that Ukraine would be targeted.

Kishinev – in present-day Moldova – was chosen as the fake target. Here, the

Red Army appeared to assemble a rifle (infantry) division, two artillery divisions and a tank corps. In reality, dummy tanks made up a significant portion of the tank corps, while each division contained a mere 100-odd men whose role included setting up fake field kitchens. To further deceive the Germans, the Soviet Air Forces flew numerous aircraft over the area in an apparent attempt to keep the Luftwaffe away. From time to time, however, the Soviet planes deliberately let the Germans through, the hope being that the German pilots would notice the apparent build-up of a large force.

Meanwhile, the Soviets quietly redeployed troops from other fronts – including southern Ukraine, Crimea and the Baltics – to Belarus by truck and train. As they drew near to the Belarusian front, transports took place at night with up to 50,000 trucks driving along rural roads with their lights extinguished. White roadside markers ensured the drivers didn't

become disoriented. Those who failed to reach their destination before dawn had strict orders to drive off the road, camouflage their vehicles, and remain where they were until nightfall.

Germans ignored warnings

The huge deception succeeded. Under cover of darkness, the Red Army managed to accumulate the war's largest store of equipment in Belarus. As many as 5,800 tanks, 7,800 fighter planes and 33,000 pieces of artillery and mortars assembled in secret. In the first three weeks of June alone, up to 75,000 train carriages rolled into the areas behind the front carrying soldiers, weapons, ammunition and supplies.

The Soviets were helped by the fact that the Luftwaffe lacked aircraft for reconnaissance after three draining years on the Eastern Front. Many that were still airworthy had already been diverted south to Ukraine.

In addition, the Germans remained masters of their own destruction. The army's top brass refused to abandon their belief, despite information from Soviet prisoners and observations by their own troops in the field. Although intelligence officers tried to warn Busch, Army Group Centre's commander preferred to rely on information from the Army High Command (OKH), who continued to assure him that the attack would take place in Ukraine.

Just one week before Operation Bagration, a German battalion commander in Belarus reported his concerns about the threat to XXXIX Panzer Corps commander Robert Martinek during a tour of inspection. Martinek needed no persuading but was forced to admit his fears would never be heard higher up.

"Whom God would destroy, he first strikes blind," he replied resignedly.

New tactics scared the enemy

Even as all hell broke loose over the head of Armin Scheiderbauer at 03.05 on >>>

A well-prepared bluff

The Soviets believed that the element of surprise was crucial in waging war successfully. The Germans must never know where the next attack might come from.

Deception and surprise attacks have always played a role in war. In the Soviet Union, however, strategists elevated the concept of military bluffing to its own independent concept: *maskirovka* (disguise). The tactic encompassed all forms of deceiving the enemy – from the use of smokescreens on the battlefield to erecting fake tanks and military installations.

The Soviets developed *maskirovka* in the 1920s, and it reached a peak during Operation Bagration. Historians believe the deception should take much of the credit for the operation's success. For example, the Red Army hid its troops

east of Minsk, while deliberately allowing the Germans to monitor fake military units in Ukraine. The Soviets also broadcast radio communications about non-existent troop movements, which the Germans intercepted.

In practice, the Red Army's *maskirovka* comprised three elements – but whether planning troop movements or setting soldiers their daily chores, the focus was always on tricking the Germans.

1 MISLEAD ABOUT TRUE INTENTIONS

STRATEGIC: At the overall level, the *maskirovka* strategy was about hiding the operation's target from the enemy. Instead, the Soviet general staff let Hitler believe – via radio as well as other deceptions – that the Red Army would strike in Ukraine.

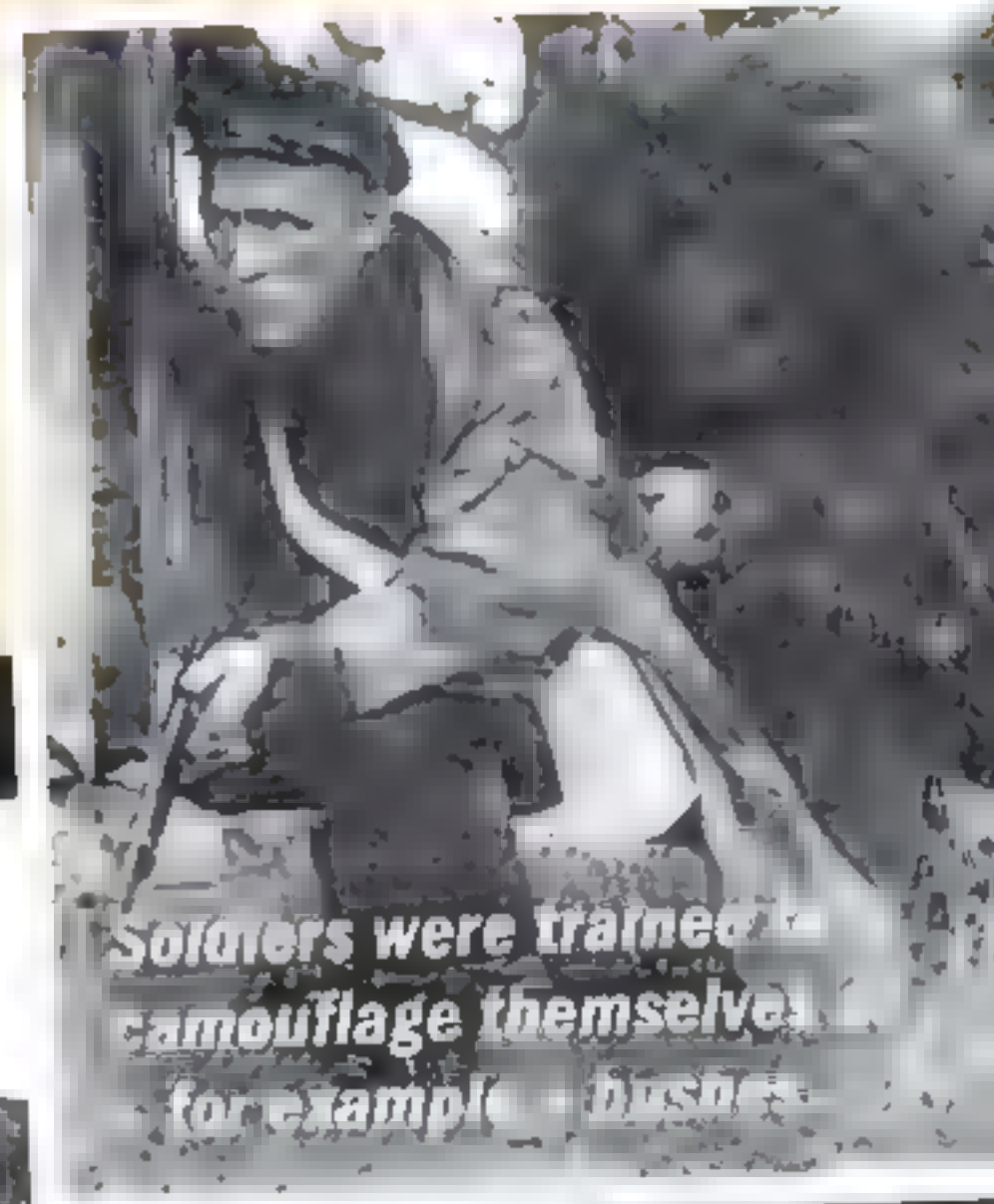
2 EXPLOIT THE DARKNESS

OPERATIONAL: In practice, it meant troop movements must be hidden. In all, the Red Army transferred seven armies, 11 air corps, and thousands of tanks and artillery units – all without the Germans' knowledge. Its methods were simple: most soldiers were brought forward by night trains, which stopped 50-100 kilometres from the front, so they weren't discovered. From here, the soldiers transferred to the battlefield in small groups shortly before the offensive began.

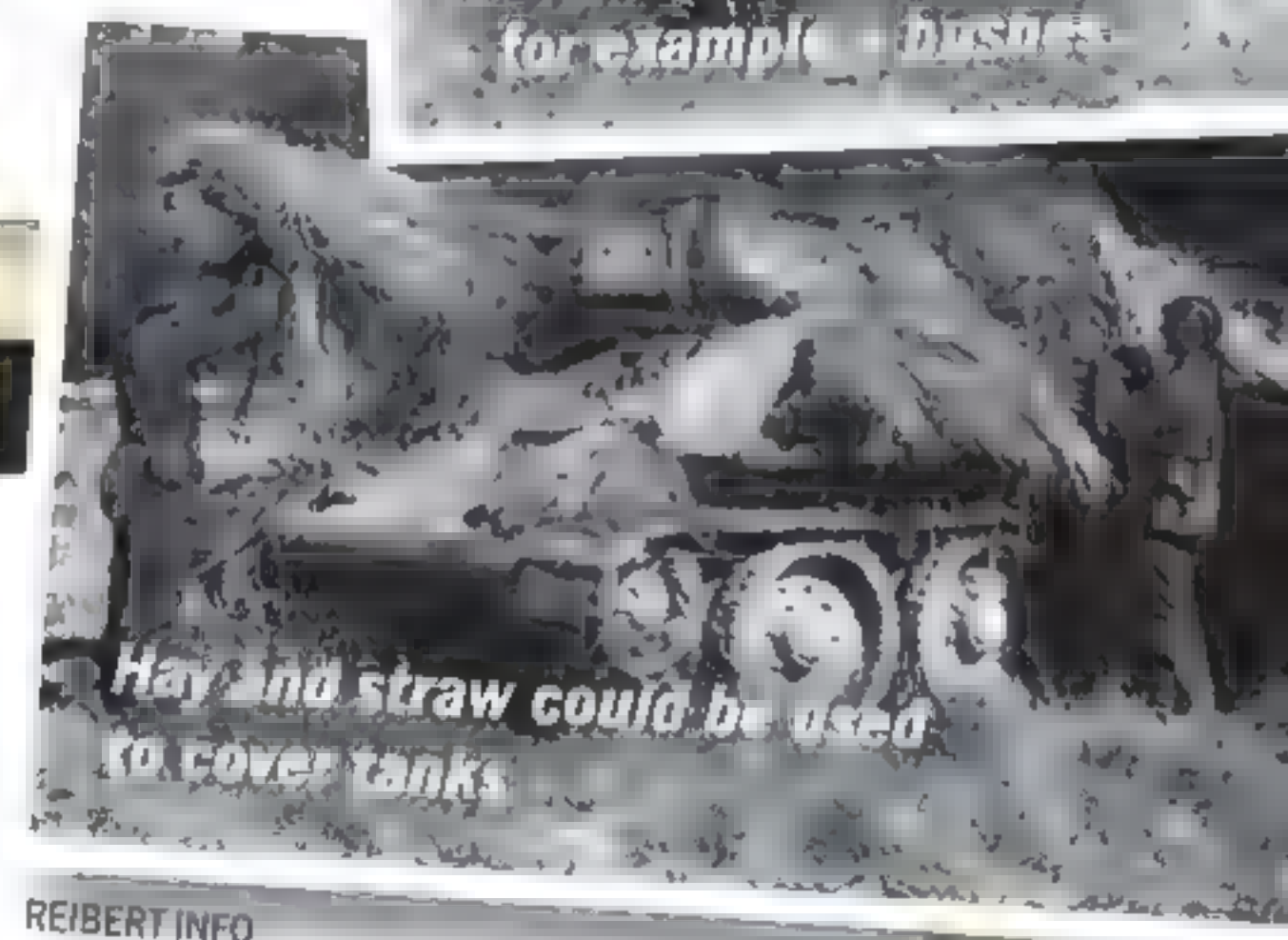
3 CAMOUFLAGE FIRING POSITIONS

TACTICAL: When they arrived, individual Soviet units had to make sure they were hidden. The soldiers carefully camouflaged their firing positions and avoided moving around in daylight as much as possible. Even bathing took place in secret after dark.

GETTY IMAGES



Soldiers were trained to camouflage themselves, for example, in bushes.



REIBERT INFO

Hay and straw could be used to cover tanks.



Unlike the Soviets, the Germans often transported their soldiers in daylight.

OPERATION BAGRATION/SZ PHOTO/BRIDGEMAN
MAGL'S/PIZZA/SCIENCE

22nd June, German high command remained convinced it must be a diversionary ploy. That very morning, Field Marshal Busch felt secure enough to leave his post to travel to the Berghof in Bavaria for a meeting with the Führer.

The attack on Scheiderbauer's position, however, was just the beginning. The following evening (22-23rd June) saw the Red Army complete around 1,000 sorties. The air force's long-range aircraft bombed everything from railway links to German positions far behind the front. At 05.00 on 23rd June, the next major attack followed.

This time, the bombing lasted for two hours, filling the air with soil and dust as the exploding shells created a barrage of fire behind German lines, trapping the cowering soldiers in their positions.

The bombardment was followed by the infantry in what was to be another nasty surprise to the Germans.

"The enemy adopted completely new tactics. He no longer attacked as in the

past on a broad front with very heavy artillery support, but instead employed concentrated groups of infantry supported by highly concentrated and

***“Whom God
would destroy,
he first strikes
blind”***

GENERAL ROBERT MARTINEK, 1944

well-controlled fire from heavy weapons... Behind these assault groups, undisclosed until needed, lay tank forces to follow on and break through,” stated the German 9th Army's daily report.

The attack's success was quickly apparent. By the afternoon, German officers conceded that the 3rd Panzer Army would not hold for much longer,

and that the strategically important city of Vitebsk was seriously threatened.

OKH replied from Berlin that it was not possible to send reinforcements. Hitler still believed that the main attack would come further south.

Blitzkrieg secured the takeover

Stalin had picked his most competent officers to lead the offensive, including General Konstantin Rokossovsky, who had helped draft the plan of attack, and Marshal Georgy Zhukov.

The plan worked perfectly from the very start. Around Vitebsk, the Red Army's mobile tank units advanced rapidly. T-34 tanks fitted with mine rollers had already cleared the German minefields during the initial bombardments. After just two days of fighting, the German defensive units were forced to turn tail and run.

By 27th June, the Red Army had occupied Vitebsk, which Hitler had ordered held until the last drop



of blood, and across the entire front Soviet forces advanced swiftly. To the south, Rokossovsky's command included a large-scale advance on the Germans at Babruysk – around 150 kilometres south-east of Minsk.

The attack was launched on 24th June, but the terrain surrounding the city proved troublesome. The area was swampy, hampering the advance of both soldiers and their vehicles.

Tanks traversed the swamp

The Red Army wasn't going to be deterred – the soldiers had been well prepared. They'd learned to build improvised rafts and use a type of sledge that had been developed for use in swamps and bogs. In the days leading up to the offensive, engineering troops had also built roads and laid bundles of wood to create dams to allow men and vehicles to reach the front.

Now – to the Germans' great surprise – Soviet tanks rumbled out >>>

The Germans would be completely crushed

Soviet forces went to great lengths to thoroughly defeat the enemy. It was a lesson learned from defeats in previous wars, and led the Soviet general staff (Stavka) to develop a new strategy during World War II: whereas Russian armies had previously been content to simply send the enemy packing, their opponent now had to be crushed

beyond the point it could regroup or carry out counter-attacks.

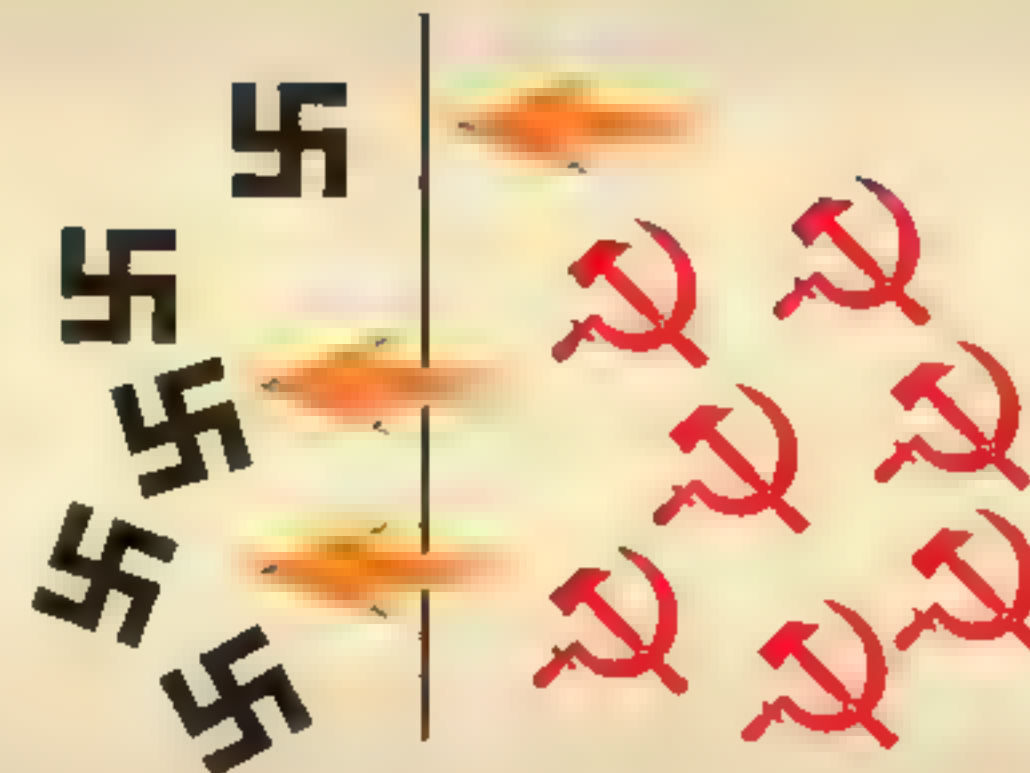
The theory, known as 'deep operation', was the brainchild of General Vladimir Triandafillov in the late 1920s, and was further developed after his death in 1931. The strategy was a crucial component of the Soviet Union's huge success during Operation Bagration.

The Red Army's 'deep operation'

- 1 The army advances towards enemy lines in individual, but concentrated, units. The forces strike simultaneously against several points on the front, so the enemy cannot focus its defences.



- 2 If some of the attacking units are pressed, reserves are deployed so the attack can continue until the enemy line breaks and gaps start to appear in the front line.



- 3 Once holes are punched in the front, attack forces penetrate behind enemy troops and encircle them as quickly as possible.



- 4 To prevent the enemy from falling back and regrouping, the attacking army must penetrate deep into the enemy's hinterland. Here the soldiers, with the help of air forces, must destroy supply and communication lines.

The Red Army possessed up to 33,000 pieces of artillery and mortars at the beginning of the offensive.

GETTY IMAGES

Wehrmacht lost its offensive capabilities

Operation Bagration ended with the German Army's biggest defeat on the Eastern Front. Between 25 and 30 divisions perished – a loss amounting to at least 300,000 men. Wounded and missing accounted for around half the losses, and many of those missing soldiers were later captured and killed by the Red Army in Belarus's vast forests. Several others were murdered on the way to the concentration camps or died of starvation and disease during their years in captivity.

Of the 47 German corps and division commanders who fell victim to Operation Bagration, 31 were either captured or reported missing. As many as nine German generals were killed during the fighting. The Wehrmacht already lacked soldiers – and the officers, with their knowledge and experience, were almost impossible to replace. This loss of officers, soldiers and equipment weakened the Germans so much that they were no longer able to carry out major offensive operations.

Huge German losses

Tanks: approx. 2,000



Guns: approx. 1,300



Aircraft: 839 at the start – the number of losses is unknown.



from the boggy hinterland, supported in the air by fighters and bombers. On 27th June, all roads into the city of Babruysk were blocked, and six divisions of the German 9th Army had been surrounded.

Following this, the air bombardment began in earnest. An estimated 526 planes – including 400 bombers – attacked the besieged Germans. Within the space of an hour, they'd dropped around 12,000 bombs. Soon the city was ablaze – aided by Germans desperate to ensure their own supplies wouldn't fall into Red Army hands.

Most German soldiers quickly realised they were facing overwhelming odds and fled. Their vehicles were forced to zigzag to avoid the bombs – often resulting in the wheels getting stuck in the mud. In a panic, many sought refuge in the nearby Berezina River, where they were mercilessly shelled by Soviet soldiers approaching the city along its western bank.

"The Nazis ran out of the forests, rushed about the clearings, many attempted to swim across the Berezina but even this did not save them," wrote Rokossovsky, while Marshal Zhukov subsequently recalled, "The terror-stricken German soldiers scattered in every direction; those who did not surrender were killed."

Those Germans who did remain in Vitebsk fought to the last – and it wasn't until 30th June that the city finally came under Red Army control. Soviet

war correspondent Vasily Grossman reached Vitebsk immediately after its capture. He confirmed that German forces had been virtually wiped out in the violent carnage.

"Corpses, hundreds and thousands of them, pave the road, lie in ditches, under the pines, in the green barley. In some places, vehicles have to drive over corpses, so densely they lie upon the ground," Grossman wrote in the official Red Army newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star).

Losses broke the Wehrmacht

Hitler, Goebbels and other top Nazis had for years spewed propaganda about the Soviet soldiers being easily beatable Slavic *Untermenschen* (subhumans). Now someone would have to pay for the Wehrmacht's embarrassing defeat. On 27th June, Hitler summoned Busch back to the Berghof to fire him. In his place, the Führer appointed the experienced Field Marshal Walter Model as the new commander of Army Group Centre.

But not even Model, who had gained a reputation for recovering even the most desperate military situations, could prevent the Red Army from rolling into Minsk. The Soviet forces liberated the Belarusian capital on the evening of 3rd July. Residents danced in the streets, welcoming the Red Army soldiers with flowers.

Despite the festive atmosphere, Minsk was a sad sight: "The capital of

During the retreat through Belarus, the Germans had to abandon tonnes of equipment.

GETTY IMAGES

"The Big Three" made plans in Tehran

The Allies had agreed on how to defeat Adolf Hitler back in 1943. The strategy was to force the Germans to fight on two fronts.

In the summer of 1944, Operation Bagration was not the only problem facing the Germans. The Soviet summer offensive was just one part of a united Allied plan that, through a gigantic pincer manoeuvre, was designed to squeeze all

resistance out of Nazi Germany and force Hitler to his knees.

Six months before Stalin's attack, he met with the two western Allied leaders, US President Franklin D Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill,

at a conference in Iran's capital, Tehran. At the conference, which took place from 28th November to 1st December 1943, the three men agreed on how to press Hitler's Germany on two fronts.

Churchill and Roosevelt promised to launch Operation Overlord, a large-scale landing in France (better known as D-Day), while Stalin in turn would attack the Germans in the east. Once the Allies had broken through German lines, they could advance on the German capital, Berlin, from two sides.

Operation Overlord began on 6th June 1944, to be followed a few weeks later when Stalin launched his major offensive, Operation Bagration.

Overlord tied up 58 German divisions in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Without the Allied landing, the Germans would have been able to transfer many of these troops to the Eastern Front when Stalin launched Operation Bagration.



During the Tehran Conference, Allied heads of state celebrated Churchill's 69th birthday on 30th November.

Belarus was barely recognisable. I had commanded a regiment there for seven years and knew well every street," Zhukov later recalled. "Now everything was in ruins; where whole apartment buildings had stood, there was nothing but heaps of rubble. The people of Minsk were a pitiful sight, exhausted and haggard, many of them in tears."

Despite the devastation, victory was within reach. Six days later, on 9th July, the Red Army mopped up the last remaining organised German resistance in the forests surrounding Minsk. Zhukov flew to Moscow to meet with Stalin. The Soviet leader received him in his dacha on the capital's outskirts. Three years earlier, Stalin had sunk into deep depression after the Germans invaded, but now he greeted his army commander with a broad smile.

"Stalin was in good humour and joked," Zhukov said later.

The two men duly ate a celebratory breakfast. Nine days later, Stalin held the official victory parade in Moscow, where 50,000 German prisoners were mocked and humiliated as they trudged through

the streets. The triumph, however, had come at a huge cost. The total number of casualties for Operation Bagration is unknown, but historians believe the Red Army lost up to 180,000 soldiers – either dead or missing. Over half a million were wounded.

**"Terror-stricken
German soldiers
scattered in
every direction"**

MARSHAL GEORGY ZHUKOV, 1944

The Wehrmacht fared much worse – it lost at least 300,000 men, the equivalent of 25 to 30 divisions. But their losses were ultimately even more devastating: whereas Stalin had a steady supply of fresh soldiers to fill the gaps, the army lacked combat-ready manpower after

five years of war, and Operation Bagration did irreparable damage to the Germans' strength.

Armin Scheiderbauer, the German soldier who woke from a heavy hangover as Operation Bagration began, escaped the massacre near Minsk and fled west. The following year, he was wounded in combat and spent two years in a Soviet prisoner of war camp. The adjutant did eventually get home to Vienna, but thousands of his comrades ended their days in Belarus's deep forests and swamps.

Konstantin Rokossovsky, one of the brains behind Operation Bagration, was promoted to marshal during the offensive.

GETTY IMAGES



The US dropped 1,665 tonnes of incendiary munitions on Tokyo during the attack – in more than 496,000 firebombs.

ROY CROSS



**Warning:
Distressing material**

The following eight pages
contain harrowing eyewitness
accounts from World War II.



By Thomas Hebsgaard

Bombardier Joe Krogman usually coped with the ongoing threat of death by thinking of himself as dead already. It kept the anxiety at bay. However, today's mission had upset the usually cheerful Iowa farm boy.

"Sonofabitch," he growled. The intercom broadcast Krogman's slightly nasal voice throughout the B-29 bomber *Lady Annabelle*.

"Sonofabitch," Krogman repeated as they prepared to take off from the small Pacific island of Tinian. "Sonofabitch." "Who is he talking about?" one of his

crewmates asked. "LeMay," replied the captain.

New tactics spread fear

General Curtis LeMay was the mastermind behind the day's mission, "Operation Meetinghouse". On the evening of 9th March 1945, a total of 334 silver B-29 bombers took off from the US-controlled Pacific islands of Tinian, Guam and Saipan, and headed for the Japanese capital, Tokyo.

The tactics were very different from previous attacks. Instead of dropping regular bombs, the B-29s would carpet-bomb Tokyo with napalm. And instead of bombing from the usual altitude of nine kilometres, the pilots had to fly low over the big city and its anti-aircraft batteries. To Krogman and his crew, it looked like a suicide mission.

"Sonofabitch," Krogman said again.

Rumours had been circulating among the B-29 crews on the three Pacific islands all morning, and the afternoon briefing had confirmed their worst fears. The B-29s had to fly over Tokyo at an altitude of 900 metres or less, exposing them to both anti-aircraft guns and Japanese fighters, which normally struggled to reach the B-29s' usual operating altitude. Worse, the planes had to attack singly instead of arriving in formation, which would make them even more vulnerable. And instead of bombing during the day, they had to drop their cluster bombs at

Tokyo burned

On the evening of 9th March 1945, 334 American bombers approached Tokyo. Soon, napalm would rain down on the Japanese capital, turning it into an inferno of flames. Rivers boiled, steel melted, and people were charred in seconds in the deadliest bombing mission ever launched.

night – something they weren't trained for. The pilots were also told to leave machine guns, ammunition and gunners on the ground to make room for a bigger payload.

Lady Annabelle's captain, Percy Usher Tucker, chose to ignore the last part of the order. As a result, gunner John R Dodd sat in his seat by the middle-right machine gun shaking with fear, while the pilot taxied on to the runway and engaged the plane's four large propeller engines.

"I can't do this," Dodd said loudly into his microphone.

"I can't do this, I can't do this," he repeated, clutching his rosary.

"Sonofabitch," said Krogman.

"Interphone discipline," commanded Captain Tucker.

The engine noise took over and the large plane rose into the air heading for Japan. Behind them, one large B-29 after another took off and flew in the same direction. Each carried more than 1,500 incendiary bombs in its belly.

Calm before the storm

As the US bombers approached Tokyo, schoolgirl Funato Kazuyo was playing with her younger siblings in her family home, which lay in one of the city's low-rise residential areas. For the first time in ages, the pharmacist's daughter was back with her entire family. Funato had returned from a village where she'd previously been evacuated, and her brothers were also home on leave from their military unit and labour service. During the evening, a cold wind blew in from the north and caused the

doors to rattle with gusts of wind that reached hurricane strength at times, but inside the family home, the atmosphere was warm.

"We were really boisterous and happy," Funato recalled years later.

The family went to bed early due to the authorities' blackout demands – but without fear of US bombs that only fell during the day. The death toll from all the previous airstrikes on Tokyo combined was below 1,300.

4.3 million
people lived
in Tokyo in
March 1945.

Japanese refused to surrender

On Guam, a little north of Tinian, LeMay stood with a cigar clenched between his teeth and watched the bombers rumble out on to the runway one by one. By the time the last B-29 was airborne, he had moved towards his headquarters to wait for news. The general was well aware that he was taking a huge gamble that could cost his best men their lives and himself his job.

When LeMay had taken command of the US bombing raids on Japan, the campaign wasn't going at all as planned. Although everything had been going the US's way since the Battle of Midway in 1942, the fanatical generals at the head of Japan's rapidly shrinking empire refused to give up. The US forces were being made to fight for island after island, and the prospect of a bloody, protracted invasion of mainland Japan was a nightmare for generals such as LeMay. The loss of US lives in such a scenario was projected to be half a million or more.

The B-29s, with their far superior operational altitude and unprecedented

long range, should have been a strategic superweapon that could destroy the Japanese war industry, break the regime's unwavering fighting spirit, and hasten the war's end. The problem was that the B-29s' bombs rarely hit their targets. Science at the time didn't fully understand the jet streams that continually blew over Japan, therefore the big planes and their bombs were constantly blown off course.

Something drastic was needed, and Curtis LeMay's plan fitted the bill perfectly: he was about to unleash a huge firestorm over Tokyo.

Firebombs in action

In 1940, the Allies observed first-hand the enormous destructive power of firebombs when nearly 450 German aircraft transformed Coventry into a sea of flames by dropping around 30,000 incendiary bombs on the city.

Revenge came in 1943, when more than 700 Allied bombers set Hamburg alight and 45,000 Germans lost their lives in an all-consuming firestorm. Determined to break the fighting spirit of the German civilian population, in February 1945, the Allies struck again – this time with a devastating three-day bombing raid on Dresden.

LeMay began experimenting with firebombs around the same time, and just ten days after the Dresden attack, he sent a force of B-29s against Tokyo with 411 tonnes of the US's new M-69 firebombs on board. The results convinced LeMay that the napalm-filled bombs were the way forward; 2.5 km² of the city was incinerated, destroying 28,000 buildings in the process. For the

The B-29 crews who flew to Tokyo thought they were being sent on a suicide mission.

GETTY IMAGES

9th March attack, LeMay doubled the number of aircraft and quadrupled the quantity of firebombs.

As the swarm of B-29s approached the coast, the men inside the aircraft's pressure-regulated cabins got ready. They pulled their heavy, steel-lined flak vests over their heads to protect themselves from the dreaded anti-aircraft guns. Some also wore helmets, although the headgear got in the way of their communication equipment.

Off the coast, small Japanese naval vessels picked up the deep hum of the aircraft's large propeller engines, but their radio warnings were lost due to poor reception in the high winds. The night was clear and the light of a quarter moon reflected off the large, silvery aircraft.

Around 2,500 kilometres away, on the island of Guam, LeMay sat waiting. He was in his makeshift headquarters, a prefabricated, Nissen-style hut like those used to house thousands of ordinary US soldiers throughout the Pacific theatre of war. The general's only company in addition to mission files and papers was the army PR man, St Clair McKelway, who had become LeMay's confidant.

The PR man had been told to stay put until the pilots had dropped their bombs over Tokyo. There was still half an hour to go, and the waiting men in the brightly lit office had run out of things to talk about.

"Would you like a Coca-Cola?" LeMay said suddenly. "I can sneak in my quarters without waking up the other guys and get two Coca-Colas and we can drink them in my car. That'll kill most of the half hour".

Shortly after, the two men sat in LeMay's Jeep, each with their own coke, staring into the jungle darkness around the camp.

Carefully chosen target

The target of the day's mission was one of Tokyo's – and the world's – most densely populated areas, with a jumble of small wooden houses and factories tightly packed along winding alleys and intersected by a few major roads. In the lively entertainment district of Asakusa, which was packed with restaurants, geisha houses and brothels, the population density was around

350,000 inhabitants per km². In all, about 750,000 people lived in the low-lying urban area. Most were poor or belonged to the lower middle class.

LeMay and the other US military planners justified the firebomb attack by saying that the Japanese war industry got most of its components from a jumble of small subcontractors scattered across residential areas. But civilian casualties were not considered a drawback – quite the contrary.

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, it was widely believed that "the only good Jap was a dead Jap". Even three weeks before Pearl Harbor, the army's commander-in-chief, General

George C Marshall, had told reporters at a secret briefing how the US would react to a Japanese attack.

US bombers, the general said, would "set the paper cities of Japan on fire. There won't be any hesitation about bombing civilians".

Bombs created instant chaos

The first planes flew over Tokyo at close to 480 kilometres per hour and at an altitude of just 1,500 metres, dropping firebombs as they went. The bombs painted a burning cross on the city as a fiery target for the following planes.

The air-raid siren didn't sound until 00.15 – seven minutes after the first >>>

Cigar-chomping General carpet-bombed Japan into surrender

The US's bombing raids in Japan had failed to cow their enemy. That changed when Curtis LeMay took over and burned Tokyo to the ground.

Curtis LeMay was rarely seen without a cigar. He even managed to keep one clenched between his teeth when talking. He might seem blunt, but people who knew him recognised the keen intellect behind the brash manners.

LeMay had excelled in Europe during the war, and in 1944 became head of the American B-29s in India and China. In January 1945, he also took command of the bombing campaign against Japan.

Here, LeMay changed the tactics that had so far failed to persuade the Japanese that further resistance was futile. The general ordered his B-29s to go in low and firebomb the cities into submission. The strategy was ruthless and cost hundreds of thousands of civilian lives, but it worked in the end.

After LeMay's planes dropped two atomic bombs in August 1945, the emperor finally surrendered, and the US escaped a bloody invasion of Japan.

LeMay took the cigar out of his mouth for photos, but otherwise always had a stogy between his teeth.



CORBIS/ALL OVER

bombs had fallen. Much to the surprise of the US air crews, no Japanese fighters took off in a counter-attack. The warning had come too late.

Schoolgirl Funato was awakened by her mother and the roar of total chaos. Loud bangs sounded everywhere. Her father put on a helmet and ran to the local school, the gathering point for the civil defence. Funato's brothers ran out into the street to try to put out the first small fires. Funato crawled with her mother and little sister into the temporary bomb shelter the family had dug under her father's pharmacy.

Funato's mother held her infant son tightly. Suddenly, one of Funato's other brothers came rushing in and shouted that they should run to the school to avoid being engulfed by flames. Out on the street, Armageddon had arrived. The night was bright with the demonic glare of the huge fires.

"The north wind was incredibly strong. The drone of the planes was an overwhelming roar, shaking earth and the sky. Everywhere, incendiary bombs were falling," Funato later recalled.

The wind created the perfect conditions for the blaze to spread, and in less than half an hour, the constant rain of napalm had turned the target zone into the closest approximation to hell on earth that humanity had ever seen. Everything was on fire.

The B-29s roared over the city from all sides, and although searchlights constantly scanned the night sky, they rarely tracked one of the silvery planes long enough for the anti-aircraft gunners to take aim.

Down on the ground, 14-year-old schoolboy Katsumoto Saotome looked up at the sky, watching the golden flames reflecting off the large bombers' shiny fuselages.

The fire's violence increased with each bombing run. When the US-designed M-69 incendiary bombs hit the ground, a fuse ignited and, seconds later, the bombs exploded, shooting a burning mass of sticky napalm into the air.

Funato Kazuyo ran with her mother and little sister to the nearby school, but the bomb shelter there was little more than a trench.

"People panicked. Running, screaming, 'We're all going to die! The fire's coming!' The sound of incendiary

B-29 brought death to Tokyo

Boeing's B-29s were created to beat all other planes in the sky. The plane could fly higher and further than almost any other type at the time and could carry a huge payload.



1

CLUSTER BOMBS RAINED FROM THE SKY

The bomber dropped E-46 cluster bombs from an altitude of 900-1,500 metres. The aircraft's two bomb bays could hold up to nine tonnes of bombs. On long voyages, the load was typically reduced to four tonnes to increase the plane's range.



2

BOMB WAS FILLED WITH NAPALM

At 450-750 metres altitude, a fuse was triggered, which opened the E-46 cluster bomb. Inside there were 38 long, thin M-69 firebombs, which were now armed. Fabric tails ensured that the M-69s hit the ground nose first.



Folded tail of fabric

Napalm

White phosphorus
Fuse

M-69 set fire to everything

When the M-69 hit the ground, the fuse burned for three to five seconds before setting off a reaction in the white phosphorus. The resulting explosion hurled the encased 'sock' of burning napalm up to 100 metres away.

bombs falling, 'Whizzz,' the deafening reverberations of the planes and the great roar of fire and wind overwhelmed us."

The many small fires joined to become one large, roaring monster of a whirling firestorm. At the bottom, the monster sucked oxygen-rich air in with hurricane force, while its centre spewed out a giant column of glowing gases. It consumed everything in its path. No fire service in the world could have tamed the monster that the B-29s had

unleashed – and certainly not Tokyo's hopelessly inadequate force of 8,100 firefighters. Nearly 100 fire trucks burned or melted in the flames and were destroyed along with the men valiantly trying to operate them.

The catastrophe was made worse by the fact that the inhabitants had been told to form civil defence units and fight any fires that broke out. "Fight, don't run," was the authorities' message. Unfortunately, the only ones who stood any chance of surviving were those who

POWERFUL ENGINES

The B-29's four engines meant that the plane could land safely even if one engine was out.

STING IN THE TAIL

The rear gunner had a perfect view from his position inside a small compartment fitted with bulletproof glass.

Attack was at low altitude

Altitude range: 2,400–1,800 m

Attack height: 1,500–900 m

The B-29s flew towards Tokyo at 370 km/h. Once there, they had to dive to avoid the jet stream knocking them off course.

Normally, the B-29s flew in formation to protect one another. During the attack on Tokyo, however, General LeMay decided that they would fly singly to save fuel normally used to maintain their position in formation.

The planes dropped to 1,500 m to release their bombs, then rose again around 30 seconds later.

3

AFTER SIX MINUTES, THE TARGET WAS DOOMED

As soon as the napalm hit its target, it created flames up to 2.5 m high. The burning mass stuck to whatever surface it hit, and after a moment transformed the target into a 530-degrees-Celsius wall of flames. The US had previously conducted experiments that showed that 80 percent of Japanese homes hit with napalm would burn to cinders within six minutes without firefighters to help.



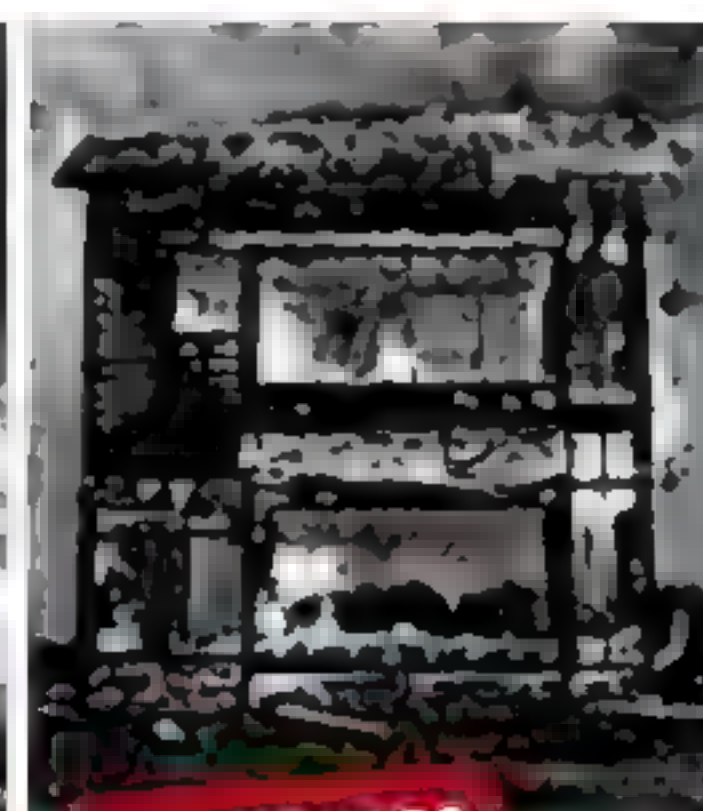
0 MINUTES



10 MINUTES



15 MINUTES



20 MINUTES

realised early on that escape was their only option.

Among those fleeing was 36-year-old Kiyoko Kawasaki. She tried to protect herself from the fire with two buckets filled with water.

“The prostitutes, who hung out by the riverbank, jumped into a nearby pond,” she said many years later. “But the pond was boiling, so they all died.”

Somewhere in the middle of the chaos stood a little girl with glasses in a light dress who didn't know what to

do. Her mother had sent her outside for some reason, and now eight-year-old Yuki Hiragama was paralysed as people fled in all directions around her. Bombs exploded in the middle of the crowd. Suddenly, the eight-year-old girl saw her middle-aged neighbour stumbling along, screaming as fire burned away her traditional Japanese kimono. Another neighbour threw himself to the scorching hot ground, crouching in the foetal position. The temperature rose and rose, the screams increased,

and Yuki could smell burning meat. Eventually she ran, too. On her way across the Sumida River, she noticed that the water beneath her was boiling.

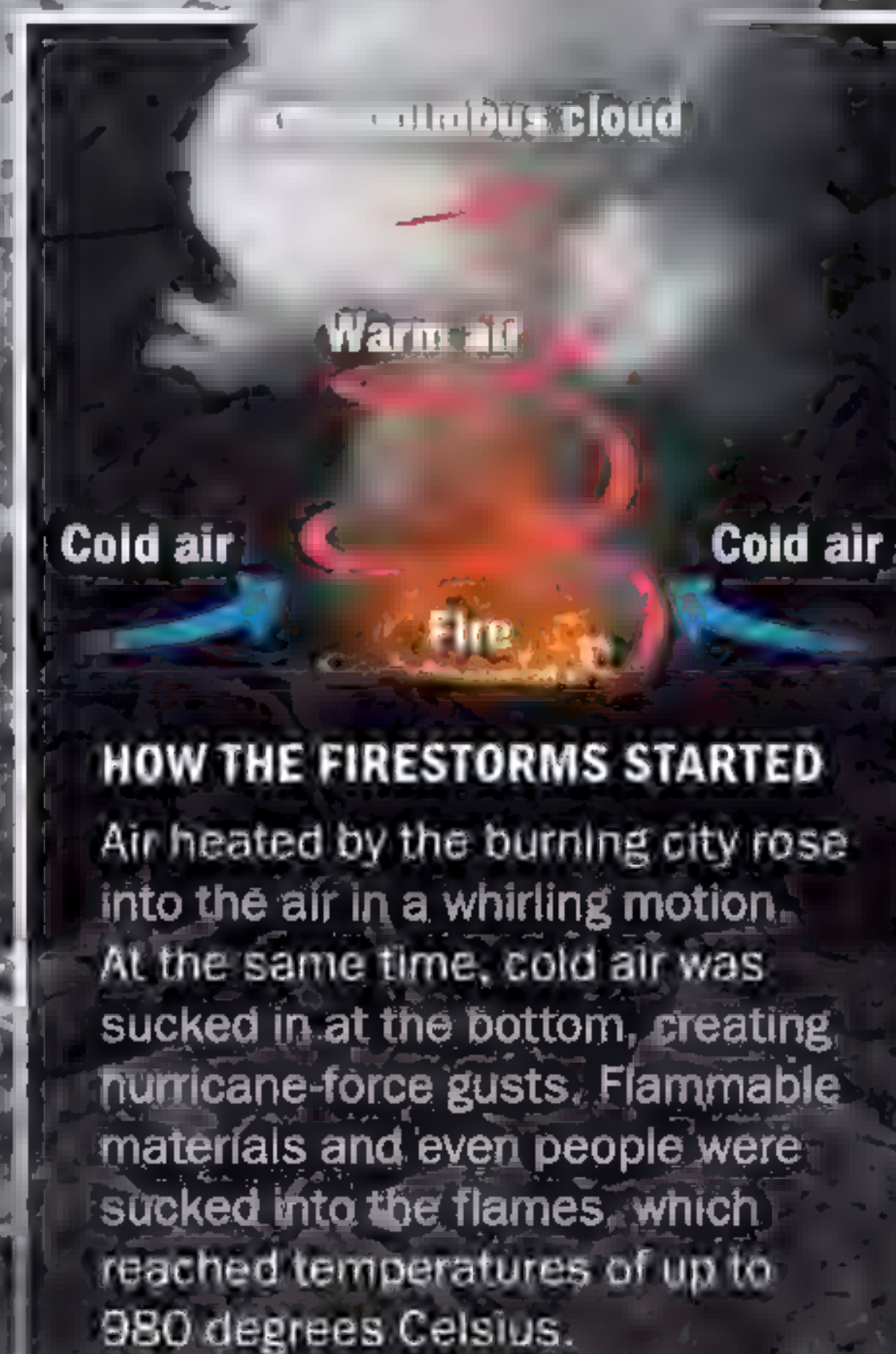
When *Lady Annabelle* arrived in Tokyo, most of the city was already on fire. Krogman's orders were to aim for an area close to the flames that was not yet on fire. Concentrating, he stared into his bomb sight. No one said anything while the bomber was aiming.

“Bombs away,” Krogman finally said. The plane jerked upwards as the »

Tokyo was a fire hazard

Many buildings were built of wood and paper, and were the perfect target for firebombs. General LeMay ordered his aircrews to target a densely populated area that was inhabited by almost 265,000 people per square kilometre.

GETTY IMAGES



FIREFIGHTERS FOUGHT IN VAIN

Tokyo's 8,100 firefighters were untrained and poorly equipped. They had no foam extinguishers and only three trucks with ladders, which couldn't be used because of the tangle of power lines between buildings.

FIREBREAKS WERE USELESS

Authorities had tried to protect the city by creating 50 km of firebreaks between urban areas. But while over 200,000 homes were demolished, the work was done half-heartedly. Often the workers simply left the remnants of the houses in situ, which gave the blaze the means to cross the supposed firebreaks.

DISTRICT WAS MADE OF WOOD

The US forces targeted a 25 km² area in the low-lying part of Tokyo. 98 percent of the buildings in the valley were built of timber.

BEFORE



In 1944, Tokyo was a buzzing city. Over four million people lived in the capital of the Japanese empire.

BOMBS HIT CROWDED AREAS

Houses, factories and workshops were tightly packed together. In the most populated areas of the target zone, there were 265,000 people per km². It was one of the world's most densely populated areas.

AFTER



The devastation was massive. The bombing razed entire neighbourhoods to the ground.

POPULATION DENSITY PER KM²

Under 12,000 12,000-20,000 20,000-32,000 32,000-54,000 54,000-265,000

CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE



GETTY IMAGES

The emperor seemed unmoved by the devastation he witnessed in Tokyo. It was only after US forces dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that he surrendered.

bomb hatches opened and the plane's heavy payload dropped towards the city. Behind him, Dodd, the crew's terrified gunner, made sure that all the bombs had been deployed, meaning *Lady Annabelle* could head home.

Other B-29 crews had significantly more dramatic experiences over Tokyo that night. The violent turbulence created by the firestorm lifted some of the mighty planes 1.5 kilometres into the air in an instant.

One B-29 suddenly flipped upside down shortly after its payload was dropped, and only feverish work on the part of the pilot saved the crew from dying. Fourteen B-29 bombers were lost during the three-hour journey – far fewer than the army had feared. Others never made it to Tokyo for various technical reasons. But the 279 that did dropped a total of 8,519 cluster bombs, with as much as 1,665 tonnes of incendiary bombs.

The devastation was unimaginable. The flames consumed 41 km² of the city; 261,000 buildings went up in smoke, and 1.15 million Japanese became homeless. The official death toll was 79,466, but that only included identified bodies. In fact, the attack probably cost 100,000 lives or more. The stench of burnt meat even reached some of the B-29s' cockpits.

Shigenori Kubota, the head of a military rescue unit, set out to recover survivors at 03.50 that morning. He

was met with one gruesome sight after another as he moved around the vast, smoking firepit. At a bridge, he found a "forest of the dead" so charred that a single touch caused them to crumble. The river under the bridge was even more macabre.

"Burned bodies and logs blackened the surface as far as the eye could see," Kubota later recalled. "The bodies were nude, their clothes having burned away, so there was no way to tell men from women and even children."

Schoolgirl Funato Kazuyo survived the night by crawling into a ditch with her little sister. At the first sign of dawn, the pair staggered back towards the place where their house had once stood. Everything was quiet.

The glass bottles in her father's pharmacy had melted. In front of the house, which still stood, lay the body of a man in the family's water tank. He had been boiled alive. Funato found one of her brothers blinded by smoke, but tears of joy rolled down his cheeks when he realised that his sisters had survived. A little later, the siblings were joined by their father and one of their older brothers.

"The people who came back were like ghosts, uttering no words," Funato later recalled. Her mother was there too, barefoot and wrapped in a military

blanket. Her clothes and hair were charred. She no longer had her baby son with her. On her back, where Funato's youngest brother had been, there were clear burn marks. Funato's mother never talked about what had happened.

The emperor finally gave up

Emperor Hirohito personally inspected the devastation six days later. Dressed in a general's uniform and riding boots, his face remained impassive. By then, a spontaneous evacuation of Tokyo was underway. More than a million people had left the capital with their meagre possessions to seek refuge far from the US bombs.

But it would be a long time before Hirohito and the fanatical generals at the head of Japan's war effort spared their population further suffering. Japanese war propaganda called for "The Glorious Death of One Hundred Million" as the napalm continued to rain down on the empire's major cities in the spring and summer of 1945.

Only the US's detonation of atomic bombs in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August convinced Hirohito to defy his generals, all of whom wanted to fight to the death. All over Japan, the hard-pressed population wept when they heard their emperor's voice on 15th August 1945 during his first radio broadcast.

"Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilisation," Hirohito said. Japan's fanatical war

minister, Korechika Anami, committed *hara-kiri* (ritual suicide) the same day.

Curtis LeMay and the other generals at the head of the US war effort could breathe a sigh of relief; their ruthless

bombardment had finally worked. The invasion of Japan had been avoided.

But while US lives had been spared, the fact that so many civilians had to die for that end would have been indefensible in other circumstances. As LeMay himself later admitted: "If we had lost the war we would all have been prosecuted as war criminals."

140,000 local civil defence members were ready to help Tokyo in a crisis. They were told to "fight, don't run" in the event of an attack. The policy led to a disproportionately high death toll.



DECISIVE BATTLES

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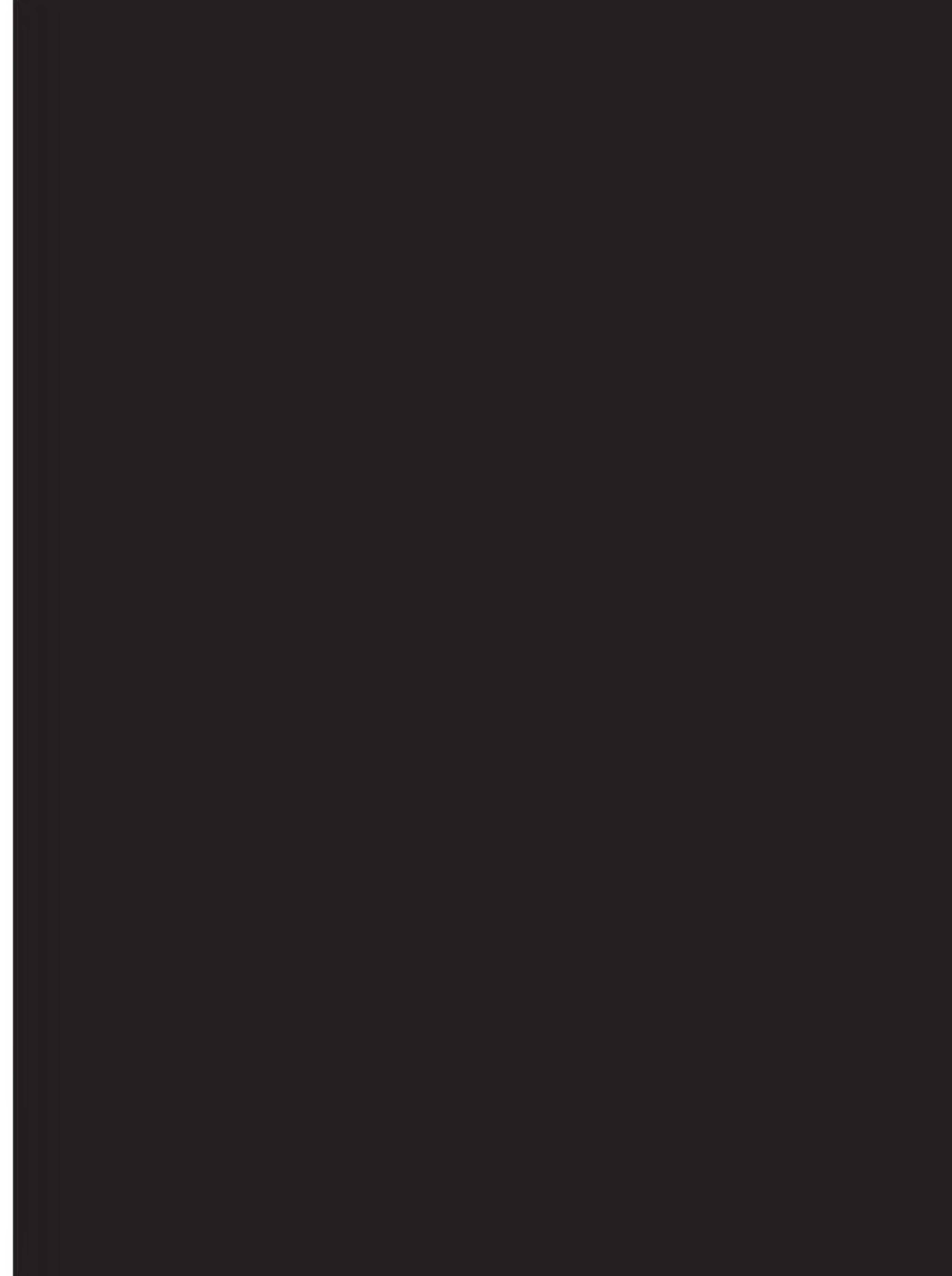
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"We'll kick those Americans out again"

The officer's defiant shout rang through the bunker. All along the Normandy coast, young soldiers were crammed into concrete defences, but with too little ammunition to repel the attack they all knew was coming. And then, suddenly, Allied troops stormed towards them. The Germans' machine guns burst into life turning the beaches red with blood. Despite the defenders' bravado, the fight was soon about just one thing: surviving D-Day. Read about the invasion of Normandy and 13 other battles that shaped the war.



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